Murderous Masterpieces

A Laura Heyns Mystery

By Gunther Hoser

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The cover page shows the painting "Judith Slaying Holofernes" by Artemisia Gentileschi (c.1613).

ISBN: 9798308301332
Imprint: Independently published

To Colette,

partner in all my adventures and the love of my life.

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Prologue

In the hills north-west of Nice, early April, 1978

Up here, above the village, the wind was even stronger. 'It will blow for three days, maybe even six,' Gastoun thought. Although he was born in the village and hadn't left it for 55 years, Gastoun had never got used to the Mistral. This strong, dry wind blew along the coast several times a year, always from the west. It made him nervous. And when he was nervous, Gastoun took to the bottle.

But today was cursed. She never got off his back. Eisabello knew him inside out. She always kept an eye on him when the Mistral was blowing. She wouldn't leave him alone today. And then this comes along. When he quickly escaped to the Café, just for three little shots, Georges gave him an envelope with his name written on it. '*Gastoun Giraud*' it said, nothing else. He finished his refill and rushed home.

He'd expected an answer from them, but thought they'd phone. Eisabello still hadn't returned, so he went up to his room and cut open the envelope. The typewritten, unsigned text on the folded sheet was short and to the point:

> *At midnight, in the old stone shed on your land,*
> *above the Chemin Saint-Martin.*

Why midnight and why up there? Maybe it's better that way. No one will be around to see them when they meet to talk. It was a delicate matter. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, and neither did they. There are more and more of these

young people wandering around the hills all day. They don't seem to have much else to do.

The moon was bright, reflecting off the sea far below. It illuminated the path and the surrounding landscape in dark blueish colours. This unfamiliar, strange atmosphere, and the noise of the wind in the pines added to his nervousness and made him jumpy. He nearly screamed when the owl fluttered across his path earlier.

Now his thoughts were scattered, making it impossible for him to focus on mentally rehearsing his words. It was essential to communicate these things properly. He believed playing tough was the most suitable approach. Maybe a disguised warning would effectively get the message across. It's important that he doesn't stutter, hesitate, or come across as overly impressed.

The road had ended, and the path was now steep. He could have used the Solex. But that would have made a lot of noise and might have woken Roustan's dogs in the last house he had passed five minutes ago. Roustan and his wife were probably asleep. The house was dark. Anyway, the path flattened out after the bend. By the time he reached the edge of his land, the stone shed would be only fifty metres away, up by the rocks under the oak.

As he walked across the field to the shed, he wondered if he had misread the time, or even the date. There seemed to be no one around. Maybe they were inside and couldn't hear him coming with all that wind. But if so, they'd be sitting in the dark, for there was no light either. Maybe they're being too cautious, he thought.

The door of the little house was ajar, moving in the wind. That meant someone had gone in, for he always kept it shut. He pushed it open and said, "Damn, with this wind... "

He didn't finish the sentence. In the middle of the small room, just four by six, and four metres high at the gable, right in the middle, hanging from the rafters, was a noose.

Shocked to his bones, he hesitated for a split second, then turned to run. But there was no escape. Gastoun Giraud had kept his appointment in Samarra.

A minute later, he was dangling from the rafters.

1

In the hills north-west of Nice, mid-July 1978

Laura Heyns had walked the last few kilometres, dragging her suitcase behind her. The heat was sweltering, and she had tied a T-shirt around her head to protect herself from the sun.

She'd got off the train at Antibes and then took the wrong bus. There were no buses leaving from where she got off, after realising her mistake, not until 6 pm. So she stopped a car heading for her destination.

At first everything went well. They'd made the usual small talk about the weather and the lack of public transport. But the driver noticed her accent and asked her where she was from. When she told him she was South African, he said he had a cousin in Stellenbosch. He'd visited him recently. Then he started to rant about 'niggers' and 'commies'. Laura asked him to stop and got out.

The deafening sound of cicadas and the potent smell of pine trees reminded her of her childhood. On this long weekend of France's national holiday, there was no traffic on the narrow, winding road. When she rounded the last bend, the sight of the medieval village stretching out over the rocky outcrop like a giant cruise liner heading for the sea was magnificent. It convinced Laura that David had been right. This was a beautiful place.

There was no telephone booth in the village. To get in touch with David, she could either wait for the small post office to

open or try a pub in the village square. As she was much too early and would have to wait anyway, she chose the bar. It was empty.

The thin, middle-aged man behind the counter was reading a newspaper. He didn't react when she asked if she could use the phone. When she repeated her request, he replied without looking at her, "Depends where you want to call."

Laura showed him the number David had written on a piece of paper. "It's in Vence, which is nearby, I believe."

"Couldn't be much closer." He said, looking at her, blinking both eyes hard. He reminded her of someone. "You're not from around here," he added, putting the phone on the counter.

Laura dialled and let it ring for a while, but David didn't answer. She asked if she could leave her suitcase in the room behind the bar. Then she ordered a coffee and carried it out onto the shady terrace.

Sitting there in the heat, the deserted village square seemed eerily silent, like a scene from an Italo Western. She leaned forward and looked up and down the empty street.

When she'd phoned David the day before, he'd promised to pick her up in Tourrettes sur Loup. "Sometime around six, impossible to say exactly when." David lived in Vence, but he had an errand to run that day. Apparently, it was easier for him to meet her here.

When they met in London last month, David noticed she was a bit down, even depressed, he said. The weather, poor nutrition, and her isolation were taking their toll. Laura had

spent almost a year withdrawn in her one-room flat in Shepherd's Bush, only reading, and writing poetry, living on less than ten pounds a week. She needed a change.

Another reason was Walter, her 82-year-old neighbour in Shepherd's Bush. Walter used to be fun. But recently he shared some disturbing fantasies that made her uncomfortable in his presence. That's when David suggested she visit him in the south of France.

She had been to Nice once before, about ten years ago, with Simone, who pretended to be her and Alice's mother. Simone's husband had given the two girls a choice: if they passed their final exams, they could choose between a small sports car and a trip to Europe. Alice had chosen a red Triumph Spitfire and Laura a trip to Europe. She wanted to get away from her family and apartheid.

But she was only half successful. Simone came along. Before going on to Paris, they spent three days in a luxury hotel in Nice Baie des Anges. Simone loved it, but it wasn't the trip Laura had dreamed of.

Nothing had happened for almost an hour now. Looking at the clock on top of the tower across the square, Laura had the impression that time was running backwards. She had barely slept the night before and was about to doze off.

An old woman shuffled across the dusty plaza towards the church. Despite the heat, the woman wore heavy, dark clothes, and a large straw hat that covered her forehead. About halfway across the square, she stopped, turned around, and seemed to look at the clock on the other side. She stood there, hesitating

for a long moment before changing direction and disappearing behind the church.

Apart from two cars parked far apart, the square was empty. Coming from London to the south of France, it all felt strange to Laura: the heat, the fairytale village, the eerie silence at midday, and the lack of people.

"Tempted to stay?" The young man standing next to her table had a beer in one hand and pointed to the chair next to her with the other. "May I? My name's Fred, by the way."

He sat down at her table without waiting for an answer. His nose was the most prominent part of his face, the other being his cheeky smile. Other than his messy hair, he was dressed in a laid-back but tidy manner.

"If you're asking me, yes, you may, Fred. I'm Laura. What makes you think I'm considering staying?"

Fred looked at her with a grin. "Look, I've never seen you. Alfred told me that you arrived here on foot a couple of hours ago with your suitcase in hand. Since then, you've been sitting here, taking in the sight of our deserted square. What else could it be? Just so you know, once you're settled here, it's hard to leave."

Laura couldn't help laughing. "That sounds fascinating. How long have you been trapped?"

Fred took a drink and looked at her with that confident grin that seemed to be part of his game. "I don't remember. But believe me, I tried to get away. This place is way too much fun."

Laura looked around the deserted square. "You're kidding me, right?"

Just then, an old Peugeot arrived and parked under a tree in front of the church. A tall, slender young man with shoulder-length hair and a Manchurian moustache got out of the driver's side, and a small, exotic-looking woman got out of the other side. The man opened the back door, picked up a small child and walked down the street. The woman followed at ten paces. He didn't stop.

Fred noticed her eyes following the strange couple. "They live nearby, just down the road. But tell me, where do you come from, where do you live, and what do you do for fun?"

Laura turned back to Fred. He had finished his beer and was still grinning at her. She hesitated. Normally, she avoided answering this kind of question. It never led to anything positive. But Fred seemed like a nice guy and she couldn't think of a clever answer that wouldn't risk upsetting him. "I'm South African. I like to write poetry and currently have no fixed address."

Fred beamed. "You're Laura, the South African poet, and you've decided to stay after observing our empty village square for two hours. You'll fit in."

Fred took out a packet of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. "Your French is impressive. I can barely hear your accent. Why is that?"

"I learnt French as a child and later worked in Paris for a few years, but that was a while ago," she said.

Fred's eyes lit up. "I'm also from the City of Love. So where did you live and what did you do in Paris?"

It felt like an interrogation to get her residence permit, but tired as she was, she complied. "I had a small studio in the Rue Beaubourg when I was modelling."

Fred lifted his head and stopped rolling. "You worked as a model?"

"For Lanvin and Balmain," she added. "But I got no say in the matter, and it was less glamorous than it sounds. I didn't like it and left when my contracts were up. But what do you do... for fun?"

Fred grinned. "Tiercé."

"Bet on horse races?" she asked.

"That's right," Fred replied. Then to the door of the bar, "Alfred, bring us two beers, please."

By the time David arrived at 7 pm, an eclectic, colourful mix of people of all ages had filled the terrace and spilled out onto the street. Most of them lived in the village, which seemed to be full of artists and artisans. Fred had introduced her to Alfred and his brother Léon, who both owned the bar. She'd also met the village doctor. Fred called him 'the flying doctor', but his name was Serge. Then she talked for a while to Jacky, a painter and jazz saxophonist. McCampbell, a bare-chested painter in a kilt and sandals, warned her about Heinz sitting at his table, whom he portrayed as the village satyr. Heinz was a ceramic artist who lived in the hills above the village and worked at the Hervé Ricard Foundation in Saint Paul de Vence.

They all seemed to know David. When he arrived on his vintage Norton motorcycle, which he'd brought recently all the way from London, there were cheers from several tables.

Laura flew into David's arms. Although smaller than her, he swung and spun her around a few times. They'd never been lovers, but after many years of sharing joys and sorrows, they had become what you'd call soul mates.

"David, you've got a beard! You look like an old sailor!" she laughed.

"And you seem to get lighter every time we meet! Are you still eating? Sorry I took so long, Laura. Let me just talk to that guy over there and then we'll go to my place."

David walked around shaking hands and kissing cheeks, then sat down at a table with three people Laura hadn't met yet. Despite his heavy bike, David was dressed for the beach. With his sturdy legs, short, square body, and big, fleshy face surrounded by red-blonde, frizzy hair, David wasn't what you'd call attractive. But he had a strong masculine presence, a big heart, and an irresistible personality.

A dentist by trade, he was full of dreams and punished by a restless temperament. When he left a well-paid job in a London dental clinic to move to the south of France, he explained that as a dentist he could work anywhere. But that turned out to be easier said than done. After spending more than a year on the French Riviera, he had only recently got his licence to practise.

The terrace was packed with a lively crowd, joking and laughing in loose gatherings or sitting in smaller groups discussing more mundane matters of life. If it was noisy outside,

Laura was literally deafened when she went into the pub to get another beer. The locals were shouting over each other and it seemed difficult to reach the bar without climbing over three rows of bodies. The air was filled with smoke and the potent smell of pastis was enough to get you drunk.

She was about to give up on her beer when someone shouted in her ear, "You have to push through!" It was the moustached man from the afternoon. He had gentle blue eyes. "Want another one?" He took her glass, squeezed in between two guys who were shouting at each other as if they were fighting, and handed her glass to Léon.

The vast majority of the locals near the bar were men, but there were a few women standing in the crowd. They pretended to listen, but probably just wanted to make sure their husbands got home sufficiently sober and on time. Other women sat together at tables, one of them exchanging a smile with her. Most of the words she picked up were in French, but she also heard English and another southern language she didn't recognise.

The man with the blue eyes and moustache handed her the beer. "I told Léon it was for Fred."

"Thanks for getting the beer, but it's for me." She wasn't sure if he could hear her. As she fumbled for the change in her pocket, he said, "Too complicated. Check with Fred." After a quick smile, he turned back to the man next to him, who had been watching them with unfocused eyes.

The noise level outside was a relief, and the air seemed fresh and clean compared to the bar. Someone was smoking a joint,

which was surprising. David had told her that there was a real hysteria over cannabis in France.

She moved over to the table where David was sitting. He was hunched over close to the other three occupants. As she stood next to him, all four of them looked up at her.

"Here you are!" David said, then turned to the others. "This is my soul sister, Laura. Laura, this is Derek, his brother Mark, and... you are Guy Alain, right?" She met their expectant eyes and wondered if she should shake hands or lean down and kiss them on the cheek, French style.

She did neither and said, "Hello, everyone. Do you want me to sit somewhere else?"

"Oh no, sorry Laura, we're a real bunch of goofballs." Derek stood up and asked a girl at the table next to theirs if he could take the only empty chair. Then he turned back to her and said, "David was just explaining to us how to brush our teeth properly," prompting a burst of laughter from all four of them.

You could describe Derek as the French version of Mick Jagger. He was just under six feet tall, with a slim build, and slightly curly, medium-length chestnut hair. He had the same angular face with hollowed cheeks and big questioning blue eyes, those pouty lips, and a fluid, almost feminine way of moving. Like his English model, Derek dressed stylishly and used elaborate gestures when speaking.

He came across as a fun-loving, pleasant guy, but after watching him for only a short time, she sensed a multilayered personality. His brother Mark was much younger and slightly taller. There was a faint resemblance, but Mark was lankier and

more reserved, even awkward. Guy Alain, who sat next to Derek, was about the same age and shared Derek's taste in clothes. Whenever Derek spoke, Guy Alain would look at him admiringly, eyes wide, and mouth half open, as if drinking in his words.

Suddenly, Laura realised David was talking to her. "…and you'll see, I live in a dream house. As you know, my landlord, Birch Wilson, owns the chain of dental clinics where I worked until last year. He's here visiting for a week. Last night he told me he's looking for some artwork to decorate the main house. Of course, he wants them to be by well-known local artists. So he asked me if I knew anyone from the Ecole de Nice. That's why I meet Derek tonight. Derek is a sort of specialist for the Ecole de Nice."

Derek burst out laughing so loudly that Laura almost jumped. "I'm sorry, Laura, I couldn't help it. But David is right. You could call me an expert on the Ecole de Nice." He didn't elaborate, and although Laura wondered why that was a laughing matter, she didn't ask.

Turning to David, Derek concluded, "I don't know how committed your landlord is to the arts. But tell him if he wants some serious advice or to meet some of these artists, he should call me and I'll set something up."

Underlining his words with a long look at David, Derek leaned back, and then turned to Laura. "David told us he wants to convince you to stay for a while. My mother is an estate agent. Are you looking for a place in Vence or here in Tourrettes sur Loup?"

Laura didn't like this kind of intrusive meddling in her life and replied spontaneously, "Derek, I've only been here a few hours. I need to explore this place before I decide." In fact, Laura had already made up her mind. Ever since she'd come to this village, she had this strange feeling that she'd finally arrived where she was meant to be. It was exactly what she had been longing for, without realising it.

"Fair enough," Derek said. "Let me know if I can help." He stood up, followed by Guy Alain, who jumped to his feet. As Mark stood up, his chair bumped into the large mastiff behind him, who growled and had to be talked down by his owner. This time they kissed each other goodbye the French style.

Noticing how tired she looked, David suggested that they both leave as well. Laura still had to get her suitcase from inside the bar. David offered to do it for her, and remembering how crowded it was, she accepted gratefully.

The blue-eyed Manchu moustache was still standing near the bar. Laura wondered how he knew she had spent the afternoon with Fred. And if the exotic-looking woman with the child was his wife or the nanny.

She pushed her way through to the table where Fred was sitting with a group of his friends and put her last change in front of him. He looked at her with his trademark smile. "What's this for? I rarely ask my friends to pay for my time."

"I'm off, Fred. Some guy in there got me a beer and told Léon you'd take care of it. He said it was a lot easier than trying to squeeze me into the pub to pay in person. I'll be back tomorrow

or later, I'm not sure yet. Thank you for spending the afternoon with me today. I had a great time."

Fred stood up for a French goodbye. "Just so you know, there's a party tomorrow night at Roussil's," he said. "Roussil is a Canadian sculptor who lives in the old olive mill below the village. It's a magical place, and everyone from the village will be there." Then he grinned and added, "Well, at least the fun part of the village."

"But I'm not invited," Laura said.

"Well then, consider yourself officially invited now," Fred said, giving her a kiss on both cheeks and sitting down with a cheeky wink.

David was already starting his bike. Laura's suitcase was standing next to him.

"How are we going to get this to you?" she wondered as she swung her leg over the seat behind him.

"Don't worry," he said, grabbing the case swiftly, and placing it on top of the tank, holding it sideways under his arms. Then he revved the engine, and they were off into the night.

2

When Laura woke up the next morning, she felt completely disoriented. Obviously, she wasn't in her tiny room in Shepherd's Bush, where the poster of Speelman Mahlangu's 'I Had a Dream' greeted her every morning on the wall beside her bed. This was a big, bright bedroom. She was lying on a king-size bed with satin sheets. To her right, in the middle of the room, was an old colonial rattan desk and chair. To her left was an immense bay window overlooking the coast and the Mediterranean. She got up, opened the bay window, and stepped out onto the terrace.

The sun was already high in the sky. It was mid-morning, and the air was balmy. There was no wind to move the gigantic palm trees in the garden below. A group of centuries-old pines stood to the right of an enormous swimming pool. But this house where David lived was only for the caretaker. The main house was a lot bigger. It stood on a hill to her left.

Laura had just had a shower and was rummaging through her suitcase for a pair of shorts and a T-shirt when David knocked on the door.

"Wait a minute, please," she said.

"No hurry," David said. "We're having breakfast on the terrace. Come when you're ready."

When she walked out ten minutes later, David was chilling in a desk chair, legs outstretched, eyes closed, arms folded across his bare chest.

She pecked him on the cheek. "The table looks really nice, with toast, eggs, and jam all arranged so well. You even put a pink oleander sprig in the middle!"

"Don't get used to it," David chuckled. "It's your first day, and I'm still trying to persuade you to stay."

She sat down at the table. "Not a bad start, David. If you keep it up, I might give in. Wow, the view is incredible! Is that Vence down there?"

David stood up and took the coffeepot to fill her cup. "Indeed, it is. This place is beautiful, but it's also one of the most expensive areas of the French Riviera. It attracts the rich and famous. The houses around here are mostly empty, only the caretakers live there. What a shame."

Laura peeled the top off an egg. "Perfectly cooked. I'm starving. Can you believe I haven't eaten since yesterday morning? I was dead tired last night. Thank goodness I didn't fall off the bike. But I must have sleepwalked into my room because I can hardly remember when we arrived."

David looked at her with a hint of concern. "You were so exhausted you had no interest in eating or talking, just sleeping. How was your night?"

She leaned back in her chair, her toast in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. "Fantastic! Now, I've got a few questions for you. Who is this Derek you met yesterday? You said he was an expert, but he thought that was hilarious."

David laughed. "Yes, he's right. It's rather funny. I said Derek was an art expert, but he's actually an art forger. He has just

served two years in prison for making and selling fake art. I asked to see him because he has expertise in forging works made by members of the Ecole de Nice. He knows many of the artists personally and can introduce Birch to some of them."

Laura couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Derek is a forger, fresh out of prison? And you meet him on the terrace of a bistro in Tourrettes sur Loup to ask him to put Birch in touch with the artists he ripped off? Is that really the best recommendation Birch can get? Aren't they angry with Derek? They put him behind bars."

David looked at her over the edge of his cup. "They didn't press charges. According to Derek, they admitted his forgeries were exceptional and perfectly executed. Some forgeries were not copies at all, but new creations based on the original art. Derek believes that his sales of forgeries initially increased the artists' popularity. They simply asked him to stop saturating the market with fakes when it started to affect the price."

David took a sip of his coffee and continued. "Derek had complied and turned his attention to another contemporary French artist who was easy for him to fake: César. He made the fake César compressions in a scrap yard and produced dozens of fake preparatory sketches signed César. Most of them were for works of art that César never produced. Somehow, he got hold of a copy of César's thumb. He used it to sign the forgeries, which was one of the reasons they passed the scrutiny and authentication processes of real art experts."

"But César was less cool about it than the others," David continued. "When he attended a retrospective of his work at his flagship gallery in Nice and saw that some pieces on display

were fakes, César blew up - in public! That set the wheels in motion and Derek went to jail."

"From the way you describe it, it seems rather easy to fake famous art and sell it," she said.

"Easy… I'm not so sure," David replied. "Derek is a trained painter and sculptor and excels in both art forms. He admits he's technically proficient but lacks creative inspiration. At first he simply copied famous paintings, which is not against the law. It becomes a crime if you copy a work to scale, forge the painter's signature and then sell the signed forgery as an original. As for the market, there are always profit-hungry investors looking for big returns. According to Derek, the art market offers highly profitable opportunities because of growing demand. It's not surprising that forgeries thrive in these conditions. That's one reason Birch wants to buy directly from the artists. Speaking of which, here comes the devil."

Birch Wilson, David's landlord and former boss, took a few steps in their direction, then stopped, turned towards the sea and exclaimed theatrically,

"Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea, but sad mortality o'ersways their power..."

Turning to their table, he continued with the same theatrical voice,

"*How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, whose action is no stronger than a flower?*"

He came to her chair and bowed, but before he could say anything, Laura replied with another quote,

"*Impossible, unless this miracle have might, that in black ink her love may still shine bright*."

Which made Birch smile. "Morning, Laura. You are rewriting the Bard of Avon. David told me about your extensive knowledge of Shakespeare, but I wanted to see for myself. How did you sleep in that humble cabin? If your current accommodation is not to your liking, you are welcome to stay in the main house, which offers a choice of six bedrooms."

"Good morning, Birch," Laura replied. "I've been sleeping like a hedgehog in winter. Thank you for your generous offer, but for now I will be content with the humble hut. I'm only staying a few days anyway. After that, I'll either move on or find a place of my own."

Birch was in his late forties. There was an air of confidence and success about him. Dressed in expensive casual clothes, he carried himself with the assurance of someone used to being in control. His salt-and-pepper hair and groomed appearance conveyed a subtle blend of maturity and sophistication.

But as soon as Laura started talking to Birch, she realized that his charm was masking a certain arrogance. There seemed to be an undercurrent of condescension in his interactions, particularly with women. The way he spoke and gestured carried a subtle tone of dismissiveness, suggesting a belief in traditional class and gender roles. Later, Birch's lack of respect for women became his defining characteristic in her eyes, diminishing the appeal of his initial charm and leaving a lingering discomfort in her interactions with him.

David invited Birch to join them for a cup of coffee.

"With pleasure." Birch sat down at the table. Laura went into the kitchen to get him a cup. When she came back, Birch was telling David that he had phoned Derek. "Some artists associated with the Ecole de Nice are meeting tonight at the Café de Turin in Nice. Derek suggests I just turn up and he'll introduce me. He didn't know who would be there. According to him, even the artists themselves don't know yet."

With a sarcastic grin, he added: "These people don't seem to plan much in advance. It's all very... spontaneous."

He was clearly mocking them. Laura set the cup down in front of Birch and poured him some coffee. "What artists are you interested in?" she asked. "As far as I know, it's a very eclectic group. There are several dozen artists, painters, sculptors, but also poets."

Birch raised one eyebrow and looked at her in surprise. "Honestly, I couldn't care less. Most of them are full of it, anyway. They design things for people who can afford their stuff and have the space to show it off. That's why I want to buy some. And maybe it will pay off in the end. You never know with this kind of... art."

Laura was appalled by this attitude towards creative people. In her view, it was a blatant display of disregard for these artists. "That's a harsh verdict," she said. "You're buying art that you don't like or even approve of?"

Birch smiled benevolently. Laura hated condescending male chauvinism, but she smiled back. However, Birch could do better. "Tell me, Laura. If you're free tonight, why don't you come and use your insight to save me from embarrassment?

Then I've got this art auction in Monaco on Friday. You should definitely help me there. And if all goes well between us, after that I've got a week off and I'm thinking of flying back to my pad near Aberdeen. The summers are a lot nicer up there and the house is a lot bigger."

When she gave him a blank look, he added, "2800 m^2 of living space. Are you tempted to come?"

"For what purpose?" Laura asked.

Her question surprised him. "Um..." he left it there.

She would not let him off the hook that easily. "All right, Birch," she said, "think about it. If you come up with something that might interest me, give it another try."

Birch didn't seem to be bothered by a minor blow to his ego, especially when it came from a woman. He laughed and stood up.

"We must have bloody noses and crack'd crowns,

And pass them current, too. God's me, my horse!"

When he bowed after reciting these verses, she said gaudily, "*Fare thee well, great heart!*" He gave her a stern look, then headed towards the main house.

David sighed. "That didn't seem like the start of a lasting friendship, but why did he seem angry? Your last quoted words were quite nice."

"Birch quoted Hotspur from Henry IV, Act 5, and my quote was Prince Henry's remark after killing Hotspur. I have to admit that my reply was a bit mean. But he gets on my nerves with his

arrogant belief that he can get away with anything because he is born rich and male."

David looked at her seriously. "Laura, isn't that judgement a little bit premature? Please don't mess with Birch, OK? Yesterday he made me an interesting proposition."

"Sorry David, but I can't bear these rich macho types, you know me. OK, I'll behave. What did he offer you?"

David relaxed. "Birch wants to buy up dental cabinets in France, or rather merge them in a network under his brand. He suggested using me as a Trojan horse. Get me hired as a consultant dentist and I would convince those dentists of the benefits of joining the Birch network. He'll pay me a generous salary and a large commission for every dentist I refer."

"David, I won't ask you if there is any real benefit for the dentists to join. But I'm worried about you. He will not limit his appetite to a few dentists on the French Riviera. You'll have to travel a lot. And I wonder if you won't get contaminated working so closely with someone like Birch."

"Laura, I’m not selling my soul to the devil and I can get out of the deal whenever I feel like it. Meanwhile, I have a well-paid job and a wonderful place to live."

"Aren't you being a bit naïve, making a deal with the devil in paradise? Think twice before you sign anything on paper and give up your soul. Now let us change the subject. Tell me about Tourrettes sur Loup. It seems like a nice place with lots of interesting people."

"Before I forget, Laura. Andrew called me yesterday. Your mother has left Johannesburg to visit her family in Brussels."

"She's not my mother," Laura snapped.

David looked apologetic. "Sorry, stepmother, mother by adoption..."

"She's my false mother. She faked being pregnant and conspired with a doctor to falsify my birth documents. That woman fooled everyone, including her husband, who still doesn't know that Alice and I have different mothers. And I will never have the chance to meet my actual parents."

"I know, I'm sorry, Laura. I didn't mean to upset you, but I thought you should know. If she's already in Brussels, she'll probably try to visit you."

"Hell is empty and all the devils are here," Laura grumbled. "Anyway, if she travels to London, she won't find me there."

"And your friend Walter, does he know where you are?" asked David.

"Oh David, you won't believe it. Walter was in tears! He was practically begging me to take him with me! It broke my heart. But I'm sure Walter won't tell her where I am. The thing is, I can't warn him because he doesn't have a phone. But I'll send him a postcard, I promised I would. Now tell me about Tourrettes sur Loup."

David stood up. "Let's go for a walk before it gets too hot. I'll show you around."

They walked under the pine trees and then around the main house. David picked up a twig from the otherwise immaculate driveway.

"I love Tourrettes," he began, "and I would love to live there. But when I quit my job in London, I promised Birch I'd watch over his property in Vence. In return, he lets me live here for free, and you have to admit it's a convenient deal. But Tourrettes is a beautiful village in an exceptional location. It has attracted interesting people, painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, actors, and film-makers. Some of them are famous, and there are also some very good artisans. Over the last twenty years, they have gradually mixed with the locals and it is still a functioning community with an exceptional ambience. You noticed that last night at the bistro."

"What I noticed was that they didn't really mix," she objected. "The locals were inside and the newcomers were out on the terrace."

"It might seem that way at first glance," David admitted, "but there were some younger locals sitting with the artists, and some newcomers were inside. But in the shops, at the farmer's market, at the bowling tournaments, at the village fair, they actually mix. At least there is no animosity between the locals and the artists, as there is towards the estate agents. The estate agents bought the land cheaply when some farmers thought they were getting a good deal or had to sell for personal reasons. A square metre now costs more than an acre ten years ago. There is a lot of bitterness and resentment. There are also rumours of increased pressure from foreign developers on those who haven't yet sold their land."

"More devils in paradise," she muttered.

David was more nuanced. "I don't know. Time moves on, the world changes, and this long-sheltered corner of France develops. People here want to become members of the consumer society. Most of the locals, apart from those who sold their land too early, are in favour of development. The Mayor of Tourrettes is a good friend of the Mayor of Nice, who has big plans for the area. It's up to the locals to decide, France is a democracy. Politics doesn't interest me. I have a wanderer's soul and stay as long as I enjoy a place and move on when I don't like it anymore."

Laura swallowed her comment. They walked in silence for a moment. The garden was stunning, planted with huge Mediterranean trees, dense shrubs, and beautiful flowers. Magnificent stonework supported the planted beds, and the walkways were cobbled in subtly coloured patterns. The property extended over several large terraces that cascaded down from the high rocky outcrop at the rear of the property.

"What are your plans this week?" David asked suddenly. "I promised a friend that I would help him skipper a boat down the coast to Marseille. We leave this afternoon and it's a two-day adventure. Since you like sailing, why not join us? The night on the water is magical. We could come back by train on Wednesday afternoon."

"I'd love to go sailing, David, but another time. Fred has invited me to this big party at Tourrettes tonight. I want to take the opportunity to unwind and get to know the villagers."

David smiled at Laura. "Just arrived and already invited to a party! You must have made quite an impact. Who's throwing the party?"

"Fred invited me," she said, "but the party is at Roussil's house."

David feigned irritation. "And nobody bothered to tell me! But I've been busy the last two weeks and haven't been to the village." He smiled and said, "You know, Roussil is a nice guy. I like his work... and his Canadian manner of speaking. I heard he won a major contract to display his sculptures near the airport. That's a reason to party and celebrate."

They had circled the grounds and were back by the pool. "You're going to need some wheels," David said. "There's a little convertible in the garage. Birch got it with the house and no one uses it. I'll get the papers and contact my insurance company for coverage."

While David went to the main house, Laura cleared their table and carried the dishes into the kitchen. Then she took the Pablo Neruda out of her suitcase and sat down on the lawn under a giant pine trees. The thought of Simone coming to Europe made her nervous.

Her birth in South Africa was a couple of years after the war. It was still total chaos. That meant opportunity for the clever and the lucky. Jacob, officially her father, was the owner of a toy factory that later catered for the global baby boom. He wanted children of his own, a boy and a girl. Simone lied to her husband about not being able to have children and pretended to be pregnant whenever he was away on business. She contacted a

doctor at a well-known clinic who dealt with such cases. Many poor white South African couples couldn't afford children and there was no effective contraception. Alice came first and then Simone asked to have a boy. The doctor told her it wouldn't be a problem, but when her false pregnancy 'came to term' the only newborn available was Laura. Simone felt trapped and took out her frustration on the baby, as if it was her fault. Otherwise, Laura couldn't understand why Simone despised her so much.

When she was still very young, Simone sent her to a convent school run by Irish nuns on the outskirts of Johannesburg, while Alice stayed at home. On the rare occasions when Simone took Laura home for the weekend or holidays, she would often leave her alone in the garden while she went for the day into town with Alice.

Simone would hit Laura for what she said or didn't say, did or didn't do, or for no reason at all. It got worse in her teens when Simone's best friend, who was into tarot readings, told her, "Laura is too pretty. She'll be trouble for you."

By the time Laura was sixteen, she felt strong enough to resist the beatings. One day, when Simone tried to hit her again, Laura grabbed her arm, looked her hard in the eyes and said: 'Don't ever do that again!' The physical abuse stopped, but from then on Simone was using psychological warfare, tantrums, and threats to control her.

This kind of abuse breaks many children. But for Laura it had the opposite effect. It made her stronger. She realised she was all alone and had to fend for herself or she'd be crushed. But she was also very emotional and needed love and hope. She never

gave up on her family and always gave them another chance. And always reaped scorn and disappointment.

Laura wondered if Simone would find her on the French Riviera.

3

Before David left for his boat trip at midday, he gave Laura a few tips and instructions about Birch and the house. Then she hugged him, wished him 'fair winds and following seas' and went back to the garden to sit under the huge pines.

She felt an urgent need to write down her thoughts and feelings about Simone. She had long stopped wondering if she would ever be free of that woman, who loomed over her life like an evil spell.

Ancient woman, mad woman
who never saw the human greatness
of the tragedy of her life
nor the waves of darkness
that she had engendered

It was mid-afternoon when she got up, went to the kitchen for an apple, and walked over to the main house. She wanted to make peace with Birch, but couldn't find him. The house was locked. As she walked back to David's place, she noticed her 'wheels'. David had taken the car out of the garage and parked it under the carport at the back of his house. It was a red convertible with black leather seats, quite elegant with its Italian design, and seemed to be in good condition. David had even washed it. There were still little puddles of water under the mudguards. She thought it would be fun to try it.

Driving this sporty car up the winding road to the Col de Vence with the top down was exhilarating. She hated driving in big cities like London. Once she was so exasperated that she left

her friend Samuel's Jaguar on a traffic island in the middle of Knightsbridge and continued on foot. But this drive was fun!

She did a loop through the hinterland, passed a small mountain village, and came back through a narrow river valley with impressive rock walls. She passed a tall waterfall and went through a tunnel before emerging, dumbfounded, on the road she had walked the morning before, dragging her suitcase behind her. She felt elated and laughed out loud, "This place is amazing!"

Ten minutes later, she parked the car in the village square of Tourrettes, under a shady tree. There were only a few other cars, including the old Peugeot of the blue-eyed moustache. She was going to try the other bistro but saw Derek waving at her from the terrace of the Café Rossi and went over to say hello.

Derek stood up for the French greeting. "You've got a stylish convertible. It suits you," he grinned. "May I buy you a coffee?"

"Do they serve food here?" she asked, "I haven't had lunch yet."

"Let's go to the other bar, Café Maurel," Derek suggested. "They serve their famous pan bagnat all afternoon, as long as they have bread."

The terrace of the Café Maurel was much smaller, with only a partial view of the village square. But the owners, who Derek introduced as Odette and Georges, were friendly. They exchanged a little small talk and Derek ordered a 'pan bagnat with a panaché' for her and a coffee for himself.

"Please make the pan bagnat special for Laura," he asked Odette. After she left, Derek explained that a 'pan bagnat' was a special round bread soaked in tasty olive oil and filled with a mixture of eggs, vegetables, olives, and fish. "I've probably had dozens of them in different places, but they're the best here, at the Café Maurel."

Laura was curious about Derek's past as a forger, but she didn't know how to broach the subject without seeming rude. Derek relieved her of that worry, obviously wanting to clear the air. "Did David explain why we met yesterday?" he asked.

"He did," she replied cautiously. "Apparently you can introduce Birch to artists he wants to meet."

"Exactly," Derek picked up the thread, "artists whose work I know well and with whom I have a good relationship."

Since Derek seemed ready to talk, she didn't want to dance around the subject all afternoon and got straight to the point. "So they're not angry with you for forging and selling their work for your personal gain?"

Derek didn't take umbrage, but tried to correct her perspective. "If you look at it in a superficial, moralistic way, you might be tempted to call it forgery. But you certainly know that many famous painters didn't mind being copied. Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Turner, Degas, Matisse, Monet, Van Gogh, Dali, Picasso... and I could go on. They all even encouraged it and copied others themselves. The creations of others simply inspired me and I used their techniques, even perfected them, to create works of art that had their full approval from an artistic point of view. As for borrowing their names... it's easier

to get recognition when you're famous than when you're an unknown painter."

Laura had many objections to such a devious presentation, but she was interested in learning more, not in giving moral lectures. When she said nothing, just looked him straight in the eye, Derek obviously thought he needed to improve his defence. "I only spent two years in jail for selling hundreds of fakes, because I never robbed or hurt anyone. César probably thought I took money that should have gone into his bank account, but that's not true, because I did all the work of creating, producing and selling. By the way, even César didn't file a civil suit or claim damages. It was just the public prosecutor of the French Republic against Derek Morton."

More interested in the facts than in his late attempt at defence, she wanted to reassure him, but she also wanted him to know that she wasn't naïve. "Derek, I'm not judging what you've done or are doing. That's between you and your conscience. But don't tell me you were working for the greater good of art. What I find more interesting is that it seems so easy to forge and sell your forgeries to reputable galleries."

"The artists at the Ecole de Nice are inspired creators," Derek explained. "I respect them. But on a technical level, what they do is not very difficult for me to replicate. I find it much harder, if not impossible, to reproduce a Renaissance painter perfectly, or someone like William Turner, or even some modern artists such as Jackson Pollock. In addition to their skills and trade secrets, such as canvas, solvents, and pigments, they had a remarkable connection between their hand and their mind.

Their control over their movements was as personal as a fingerprint."

Rarely getting the chance to talk to an artist who was also a crime expert like Derek, she put aside ethical considerations and continued out of sheer curiosity. "Birch said that art is also an investment. Aren't there so many fake paintings and sculptures out there that it's hard to tell what's real and what's fake these days?"

Derek leaned back and laughed. "Who cares? As long as you have a certificate of authenticity issued by a recognised expert, you can be sure of its value. When it comes to money, it's not the art that counts, it's the paper that's attached to it."

Odette brought the salad sandwich and a panaché, which is a mixture of beer and lemonade. Laura took a bite out of the juicy sandwich so that the olive oil dripped onto her plate. This 'pan bagnat' was truly divine. It tasted of holidays, sunshine, and the sea.

Between two bites she continued. "David told me you studied art and are a trained painter and sculptor. Why don't you do something of your own? Now that you've had some public exposure, it should be easier to make a name for yourself."

Derek looked at the wall behind Laura. "My own paintings aren't great. I have to admit that I'm not artistically creative. Technically, yes, I have ideas and the experience to go further, but pure creation is not my strength."

His gaze returned to Laura. "I am condemned to continue what I have started. And you're right. I've had some publicity.

Someone well connected offered me a partnership and now I only work on special assignments."

Laura didn't want to know more about these ‘special assignments’, so she didn't comment and changed the subject. "Derek, you kindly offered to help me find a place to rent. David has put me up for the time being and I can stay there as long as I like. But David is like a brother to me. I don't want to take advantage of his hospitality and I'd also like to find a place in Tourrettes sur Loup, preferably in the old village."

Derek raised his eyebrows. "The old village was fine for the locals when they didn't know any better. Now they prefer their villas outside. Those old houses have thick limestone walls that hold together like jigsaw pieces. The mortar is long gone. The houses have no insulation, neither in the walls, nor in the floors. They are hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and humid when it rains for over three days, which sometimes happens. You'll hear someone snoring two floors down, and your fuses will blow regularly because someone on the other side of the village has a bad earthing system."

Laura's laugh came so suddenly that she almost spat bits of her sandwich across the table. "Oops, sorry. I can see why you don't work for your mum. She'd be bankrupt in a month. Look, I'm easy, I've seen worse, and I like the vibe of this artistic community. I'd like to be in the middle of it."

"It's your choice, Laura. It shouldn't be too hard to find a place in the old village. How big and how much do you want to spend?"

"As little as possible, I'm almost broke. But I'd like two rooms, a kitchen, and a terrace with a view of the sea." she put on what she thought was a winning smile, but Derek didn't seem to think it was necessary.

"I'll see what I can find," he said, getting to his feet. "Sorry, but I have to go now. I have some things to take care of before I meet up with Birch in Nice."

Laura got up for the French goodbye. "That's OK, Derek. It was interesting to hear about your experiences. And thank you for helping me find a place in the village. Let me pay for your coffee." He flashed his big Mick Jagger smile and left.

Laura was still wearing the shorts and T-shirt she had put on that morning. After finishing her pan bagnat, she walked over to the counter and had a long chat with Odette before heading home to change for the big party.

When she arrived at the village square that evening, she couldn't find a place to park her car. The streets were lined on both sides, even along the access road. There were a lot of vans near the two bars, but she also saw some rather luxurious cars. She drove back to the entrance of the village to find a space and walked back to the square.

She did not know where the party was, but surely everyone in the village knew the famous Roussil. When she got to the square, she saw three elderly women in black sitting on the stone bench along the south side of the church. One of them was tiny and very old, the other two could have been her daughters. Laura went up to them, greeted them and asked where she could find Roussil.

"What's the gentleman's name you said, Rossen?" the tiny old lady asked. "Are you the girl who arrived on foot yesterday?"

'Girl' is flattering when you're just over thirty, Laura thought.

"Fewer and fewer people walk these days," the old lady continued, not waiting for Laura's answer. "We used to carry our figs and beans on our backs and walk all the way to Antibes to sell them at the market."

The other two women nodded, one of them adding, "We went through the Vallon de Pascarressa, and then..."

Laura cut her off. "I'm sorry, ladies. You'll have to explain that some other time. If you don't know Monsieur Roussil, perhaps you can tell me where the old olive mill is?"

"It's not far," replied the tiny old woman, "but you can't visit it because a Canadian lives there now, I have forgotten his name, with all these strangers in the village now."

"Roussil, I think his name is," said the woman on her left, and then she smiled at Laura. "Oh, that's it. You said Roussil, not Rossen, didn't you? Go that way," she pointed along the church wall. "After a hundred metres you'll see a narrow passage between two houses on your right. Follow that path, it leads down to the olive mill. Are you invited to the party? They are having a party down there tonight."

Laura thanked them, wished them a pleasant evening and set off to find the narrow passage behind the church. Neither the road leading there nor the passage itself was very narrow, but behind the houses the path became quite steep. It was still in its original state, as it must have been long ago, with large

stone slabs polished by centuries of use. As soon as Laura passed the last row of houses, she heard the music, which grew louder as she got closer. Soon she heard voices and laughter and then she saw the crowd.

She hadn't seen such a picturesque scene since Woodstock! The olive oil mill itself was an attraction, with its enormous water wheels and several old stone buildings on different levels. They had done an amazing job of restoring the whole place, with large pots of local trees and shrubs all over the place. The buildings were at the bottom of a green valley, with lush vegetation clinging to the rocky walls.

But the real attraction was the crowd, probably more than a hundred people of all ages, sizes, colours, and shapes. People in every imaginable outfit, mostly in bright colours, laughing, dancing, drinking, eating, or all of the above.

As Laura passed the porch and entered the mill yard, few people paid her any attention. Through the large panelled open doors of a building on the left, she could see a spacious reception room. A dozen chairs surrounded a massive old wooden table where a group of men and two elegantly dressed women were talking.

The people in the crowded courtyard were much more casually dressed. It was clear from their behaviour that they all knew each other.

Descending a few steps, Laura entered a large courtyard where most of the people were dancing and others were sitting or standing along the sides. Long tables lined the walls, laden with an array of food items including salads, roast chicken,

sausages, prawns, cheese, cakes, and more. A few small barrels, probably filled with wine, were stacked under the tables, along with crates of beer and other drinks. Huge speakers on the walls played music from the Queen, Rod Stewart, Robert Palmer, Billy Joel...

Laura had a burning desire to dance, but first she wanted to look around and see if she could find anyone she knew. As she passed a smaller porch and entered another large courtyard, she saw Fred, with his trademark smile, standing among a group of young women. He was listening to their animated conversation.

Laura walked up to the group and stood just behind Fred. When the woman finished, the group laughed, Fred the loudest, even clapping his hands on his thighs. Two of the women looked at Laura and Fred turned around. His laughter turned into a broad grin. "Laura!"

He turned back to the group. "Ladies, let me introduce you to Laura, a South African poet who fell in love with our quiet village square. By the way, Laura, what's your last name?"

"Heyns," she said, "Laura Heyns. Hey, everybody!"

When she held out her hand, they came to kiss her cheeks and tell her their names. They were all at least ten years younger than her. Laura smiled and said, "I'm not sure I'll remember all your names right away, but it's a pleasure to meet you."

Fred put his hand on her shoulder. "Now I want you to meet Roussil. He's right over there." Laura looked in the direction he pointed and saw a burly middle-aged man with cowboy legs,

dishevelled grey hair, and a beard. He was talking to the exotic woman Laura had seen the day before with the blue-eyed moustache. Fred introduced them and Roussil shook Laura's hand.

"Hi, it's very nice of ya to come tonight, eh? I hope ya will enjoy the party, eh?"

"I'm sure I will, Roussil, and congratulations on the contract at the airport," Laura added.

"So ya heard about that, eh? It's true, eh, that it was about time I could put up some of my stuff along the beach, eh? The Canadians who were visiting wondered if I spend all my time in France tannin' my ass, eh?"

Roussil's mouth wasn't smiling, he was laughing with his eyes. Laura liked him immediately. Then she turned to the exotic woman and said: "I'm Laura, nice to meet you."

The other woman was almost a head shorter than Laura and had a beautiful light brown face, with full lips, and huge dark eyes, made even bigger by a generous amount of mascara. That was the only make-up she wore. Her hair was long, dark brown, parted down the middle, and flowing freely down her back. She was wearing a long, bright, colourful dress that made her look like a gypsy.

"I'm Naomi," she said, wrapping both hands around her cup. There was an awkward moment when Laura didn't lean down to kiss her on the cheek. But Roussil interrupted. "Enjoy the show, eh? There are so many folks here, I'm going to get blisters if I shake everyone's hand, but I'm going to have a look around, eh?"

"No need to shake hands. Just give them a peck," Fred said.

"Then I'll get blisters on my cheeks, eh?" Roussil touched Fred's shoulder. He turned and walked a few steps further, offering his hand to another guest.

Fred grinned at the two women. "Ladies, I could do with another glass of wine. Can I get you some?"

"Yes, please," Naomi nodded.

"Not for me, Fred," Laura said. She wanted to dance, but until Fred returned, it would be rude to just leave Naomi and walk away.

As soon as Fred was gone, Naomi asked her, "Would you like to come and dance with me? I've been trying in vain since I got here an hour ago. There's always someone who wants to talk."

"I'd love to," Laura said, "but Fred..."

"Oh, Fred won't be back anytime soon. He's already forgotten about us and is chatting to someone over there," Naomi said. "Come on," she took Laura's hand and hurried her onto the dance floor.

For over an hour, they literally went wild, forgetting the world. At one point, a circle formed around them, clapping and cheering as they performed the most extravagant acrobatics. Naomi was a perfect dance partner, creative, funny, and always quick to coordinate their moves. When the music stopped for a moment, she dropped to the floor, exhausted.

"Come on Naomi, let's get a drink," Laura said.

Noami got up, and they headed for the tables. They carried their cups to another terrace, where it was a little quieter and a light breeze brought some freshness.

"Where's your partner?" Laura asked.

"You know him?" Naomi looked at her.

"No, I only arrived yesterday," Laura replied. "I saw you both in the square. Your partner was carrying the child and you were walking ten paces behind him, that seemed strange."

Naomi didn't react to her remark and said, "Rudi is at home looking after Miri, our daughter, so I can come and dance. Where are you from?"

"Right now, I'm coming from London. But I'm South African. And you?"

"I've been here in Tourrettes for about six years." Naomi looked at the crowd on the other terrace. "Before that, we were in Germany. I'm French, from Paris."

"You look and dance like a gypsy," Laura said. “Are you a professional dancer?”

Naomi looked at her and laughed. "I try my best. I love the Romani. You know, they come from India. Sometimes I pretend I'm part Indian. But I'm just an average French bourgeois. In fact, I'm more into martial arts and teach aikido with my new partner. If you're interested, the first few lessons are free".

Did she say 'new partner', Laura wondered. David had mentioned the loose arrangements of the alternative

community in the south of France. Laura looked at Naomi questioningly.

"We separated," Naomi explained, obviously aware of Laura's thoughts.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Laura replied. "What about Miri?"

Naomi smiled again. "Don't be sorry. The only reason we have stayed together was because of Miri. Now that I have met someone, we have agreed that she will live with me. She'll visit Rudi or he'll visit her. It all depends on Rudi's plans for the future, which are still vague. Rudi wants to finish his doctorate and then decide. He'll probably go back to Germany."

They talked a bit more, went back to dancing, and over the next few hours Naomi introduced Laura to a few more of the villagers.

Towards the end of the party, as she was preparing to leave, a rather elegant woman walked up to Laura. Her dress was sober, not the exuberant style of the artists. So was her attitude and her speech.

"Hi, I'm Solange and you are…let me guess, you are the woman who arrived on foot, left on a motorbike, and returned the next day in a sports car," she remarked.

Laura didn't know what to say, so she didn't answer.

Solange touched her arm. "Oh goodness, that sounds quite awkward, doesn't it? It was not intended in that way. I found the sequence to be rather amusing."

Laura didn't understand what she meant and found the remark a little annoying, so she smiled and replied, "It's funny that you know about my means of transport when I've only been in the village for a few hours and have never met you before."

Solange laughed. "Welcome to the charming village of Tourrettes sur Loup. You have probably never lived in such a small place." Then she continued more seriously, "You leave a little stardust wherever you go, Laura. I was hoping we would have the chance to meet. I have a very attractive job offer that will interest you if you are looking for work. This is not the right place to discuss it. Can you make it to my mother's house in the village tomorrow morning around ten?"

Such an unusual request from someone she didn't even know made Laura curious. Besides, she needed to earn some money, she probably had less than a hundred pounds left, and she didn't want to ask David to feed her.

"I'm not looking for work," she replied, which was true in the strict sense. But she tried to reverse the roles and added, "Nevertheless, let's see what you need. Where does your mother live?"

Solange smiled knowingly. "In the old village. Her house is easy to find. Anyone can guide you in the right direction. Just tell them you're looking for Eisabello Giraud."

4

The next morning the weather had changed. When Laura opened the door to the terrace and looked out, heavy grey clouds had darkened the sky where the Mediterranean should have been. The air was sticky, almost suffocating. It was half-past eight and, despite her desire to stay in bed, she was also determined to find out about Solange's job opportunity. For a neutral appearance, she decided to wear the only dress she had brought with her. She had left two trunks full of her belongings, mostly clothes and all her books, with her friend Samuel in London. Samuel had agreed to store the trunks in his big house in Hampstead until she settled somewhere.

Samuel... she met him in Cape Town. When she returned to South Africa from Paris, she first tried to reconnect with her 'family' in Joburg. But when Simone tried to set her up with a paediatrician who barely acknowledged her and only spoke to Simone, she left for Cape Town.

Gertrude, a German friend of Laura who worked at the famous Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, introduced her to Samuel. He was a young anaesthetist who lived in Cape Town's District 6. The area was a racially mixed oddity during apartheid. Samuel's day job was at Groote Schuur, but in his spare time he volunteered at the District 6 hospital.

Samuel never knew his father, but he adored his mother and she protected her son. Their second date was at her home. She was an observant Jew and only accepted Laura because Samuel told her that Laura's family was also Jewish.

Samuel wasn't religious. Like many modern Jews, he kept one foot in the community but did not follow any of the complicated rules and rituals. Laura's father Jacob was a traditional Jew, and at home Laura had to behave strictly as a Jew. Simone, who was Catholic by birth and probably by faith but pretended to be a Jewish convert, forbade her daughters to talk about Catholicism at home. At the Catholic convent school where Simone had sent Laura, she had to keep quiet about her Jewish family. Worse, the nuns told Laura that while she had a chance of going to heaven, her family would surely go to hell.

One might think this would be confusing for a young child. But Laura decided that most religious rules were hypocritical and in time developed her own personal spirituality.

Samuel wanted to get married, but Laura always put a stop to that. Being very romantic but unconventional, she couldn't see the point and even feared that marriage might damage a loving relationship. She lived with Samuel for seven years. They left Cape Town for New York when Samuel was offered a lucrative partnership there by a university friend. Together they started their 'Nip and Tuck' cosmetic surgery in 'the greatest city in the world'.

But Laura wasn't happy. At 23, she was innocent and thought she loved this very caring and attentive man who showered her with extravagant gifts and took her to glamorous events. It took her six years to realise at 29 that something was seriously wrong with their sex life, or rather the lack of it.

Whenever she cautiously questioned Samuel, he deflected her questions with assurances that she was the most precious gift in his life. Finally, after they had moved to London to set up

the UK branch of their cosmetic surgery, he confessed to her he was gay. Homosexuality had recently been decriminalised in England and Samuel wanted to come clean. Laura realized that all these years she'd been the perfect catch-all for him, a loyal friend, a caring housewife, and the ideal cover for his public image. They separated a few months later, but remained friends.

Laura got dressed and jumped into her car for a coffee in Tourrettes sur Loup. It was Monday morning. The Café Rossi was closed, so she went to the other one, the Café Maurel. Three heavy-set men were standing at the bar, turning to look at her as she walked in. Another older man was sitting on a barstool, his right elbow on the counter. He was holding his head and looking at the small glass of white wine in front of him. Even though the big doors and windows were wide open, the place smelled of stale cigarette smoke and beer. Odette was sweeping the floor, and behind the bar a young man was polishing glasses with a towel and talking to the men in front of him.

Odette smiled at her. "Good morning, Laura. You are up early. Today is not the best time to visit the area. There will be a thunderstorm later this morning."

"Hello Odette," Laura replied. "True, it looks like it. But I had no intention of going sightseeing. May I ask you where Eisabello Giraud lives? I've been invited to visit her this morning. Solange said anyone could tell me where she lives."

Odette stopped sweeping and walked to the entrance, pointing across the square. "If you enter the village from that left entrance, the Giraud house is the second on the left. It's

four storeys high, and the facade has just been restored with trompe l'oeil windows on one side."

Laura thanked her and walked over to the bar. She nodded to the three guests who were looking at her, asked for a large coffee with milk and a croissant, and carried them out onto the small terrace.

As she had ten minutes left after her coffee, she took the right entrance to the village, under the clock tower. It really did look like a fairytale place. The houses were tall and narrow, of slightly different sizes, covered with round Roman tiles and built of randomly sized limestone. The joints between the stones were filled with lime mortar, a slightly different colour for each house. Only the corners were made of uniformly shaped, much larger stones, piled in regular patterns. Some entrances were carved limestone with sculpted round-arched cornices, while others simply had a thick, rough-hewn oak beam supporting the two- or three-storey facade above. Because the alley was on a slope, all the windows seemed to be placed at random heights. Most had flowerpots on the ledge. There were many large stone basins next to the houses, planted with small trees, or climbing plants such as honeysuckle, jasmine, or wisteria. Small shops displayed handicrafts, especially ceramics, olive wood, jewellery, weaving, and leatherwork. Some signs pointed to the homes of painters and sculptors.

To avoid getting lost, Laura stuck to the lane inside the outer row of houses rather than exploring the village's maze of alleyways. She soon found herself at the other entrance to the village, next to the Giraud family home. This spacious building was indeed very different from the others. It was wider and

taller and a fine finish covered the walls, which had recently been painted mustard yellow. Large slabs covered the corners, giving the impression of large rectangular blocks laid alternately on each side up to the roof. On one side of the building there were only three real openings, while the other five windows were merely painted to look like the real ones. On the second floor, a trompe l'oeil balcony had a real, large bowl built into the wall with a live, lush plant hanging from it, adding to the illusion.

Laura climbed the two massive stone slabs leading up to the heavy wooden front door and, finding no bell, used the old door knocker.

Solange opened almost immediately and smiled at her. "Right on time, Laura. Please come in. I just made us some coffee. Have you had breakfast?"

"I have, thank you," she replied, "but I wouldn't mind another cup of coffee."

Heavy curtains hung in front of the windows, leaving the ground floor rather dark. It was sparsely but tastefully furnished and decorated.

"Let's go to the first floor where my mother lives." Solange smiled. "Will you help me carry one of these trays?"

Solange climbed the rather steep stairs ahead of Laura. The house was spacious enough to have a separate staircase and hall on each floor. There were three doors on the right, one of which was open, and the stairs continued up behind them.

Solange stopped at the open door and asked, "My friend Laura has arrived. Can we come in, Mamina?"

Well, 'friend' is a bit of a stretch, Laura thought.

Here the curtains were open, and it was one floor up, which made the room much brighter. The woman who came towards them was an older version of Solange, only a little taller, with the same slender body and the same elegant and sober demeanour. She was wearing a long burgundy linen skirt and a white blouse.

"Thank you for coming, Laura. I really appreciate it. Solange has told me a lot of good things about you."

This is getting better and better, Laura thought, wondering why they had been discussing her and where Solange got all this information about her.

"Please come in. Let's sit at the table by the window." Mrs Giraud let them into the room and sat down in one of the three comfortable chairs arranged around the table. Solange emptied the trays, put them aside, and they sat down.

It wasn't Solange who spoke first, but her mother. "Solange told me you had just arrived. I don't suppose you've heard about my brother."

Laura must have looked a little lost, because after a moment Mrs Giraud continued. "They found him four months ago, hanging from the rafters of a stone shed up in the hills, where we own some land."

Such a dramatic announcement, made so dryly, so early in the morning, and by people she barely knew, was rather unsettling to Laura.

"By all appearances, he committed suicide," Solange began, but her mother interrupted immediately.

"It wasn't suicide. Gastoun wasn't suicidal," she protested.

"He was an alcoholic, Mamina," Solange replied. "Suicide is very common among alcoholics."

Solange's mother glared at her. "If all alcoholics committed suicide, there would be no alcoholics left. Gastoun was my brother. I knew him better than he knew himself. He wasn't depressed. He had no material or mental problems that could drive him into dark moods."

Solange turned to Laura. "The police, like me, and everyone else except my mother, concluded that it was suicide. Nevertheless, they inquired..."

"Ha, if you can call it that," Mrs Giraud interjected.

"...made an investigation," Solange continued, "and told us there was no evidence of criminal activity. As for footprints, fingerprints, cigarette butts..."

"There were many fingerprints and footprints other than Gastoun's," Mrs Giraud interrupted.

Solange shook her head. "Which is normal in a house open to every passing tramp up there in the hills. The investigators said it would be impossible to track them all down. Anyway, there was no evidence of outside interference. It would have left some traces in the shed. And since they couldn't find any evidence of a serious threat to my uncle..."

"Which isn't true either, Solange!" Mrs Giraud seemed to grow impatient with her daughter.

The argument between the mother and daughter about Solange's uncle's death made Laura uncomfortable. Above all, she wondered what it had to do with Solange's job offer. She had to clear the air.

"May I interrupt your discussion?" she asked. "Surely you didn't invite me here to ask my opinion on this matter. I don't know your uncle, and I don't know the village. I'm really the last person who could help you settle your differences."

"That's exactly why I asked you to come," Solange replied, to Laura's astonishment. "You have just arrived. You don't know anyone and no one knows you. But you are an intelligent woman, fluent in French and English, used to dealing with whatever life throws at you. I am convinced that you have the profile."

"What profile? What are you talking about?" Now Laura was completely lost.

"To investigate," Mrs Giraud replied calmly. "To do a job, the police should have done four months ago. With fresh eyes and our help."

"Mrs Giraud..." Laura began.

"Call me Eisabello," she interjected. "We're going to be working together for the next few weeks or months. Let's make it easier for us to communicate."

Laura didn't know what to say. Common sense told her to get up and leave. But the positive attitude of the two women and

their confidence that she was the person they were waiting for confused her.

She struggled to control her emotions and finally started again. "OK. Mrs Giraud... Eisabello. I'm not a private detective. I have no experience in this matter and I wouldn't even know what to do. You must understand that I'm not an adventurer. If you're right and your brother was murdered, I certainly wouldn't want to chase after the murderer and attract his attention."

"You don't have to chase a murderer, Laura," Solange said quietly. "Apart from the fact that this isn't a murder case... Stop for a moment, Mamina," she looked sternly at her mother, then turned back to Laura. "Apart from the fact that this isn't a murder case, we just want you to investigate a few things. We can't do it ourselves. Everyone around Vence knows us and our family. Thanks to Mamina..." she turned to her mother again, "this story has received a lot of attention in the local press. As a result, we can't even go to a shop without causing a stir."

Turning back to Laura, she added, "No one knows you and no one will suspect any connection with us."

"What if it was murder, as your mother suspects?" Laura asked.

"In that case, we will hand the whole thing over to the police with the fresh evidence you have uncovered, and they will deal with it."

It seemed simple and clear to Solange. Laura was much less sure. Like wasps that attack when you can't yet see their nest, a

cornered gangster will shoot you when you don't yet know his face.

It was all so strange that Laura wanted to leave. She got up. "It's impossible to commit myself like this," she said. "I need to think about it."

"That's perfectly normal, Laura," Eisabello also stood up. "Before you decide, let me add I will pay all your expenses plus five hundred francs a day. If you get a positive result, I will add ten thousand francs to that. I'm talking about new francs, of course, and in cash, without taxes. It would be too complicated to make it official, considering you are South African."

Laura looked at her, stunned.

"It's my brother's honour, Laura," Eisabello explained. "He wasn't a weak coward who shirked his family responsibilities. He didn't commit suicide. I know that and I want to restore his honour and the honour of our family. And I want to bring his killer to justice."

Solange accompanied Laura downstairs and even to her car. "I wanted to explain something without my mother interfering all the time. She is obsessed with this case and can't understand that no one but her can see the 'evidence' that my uncle was 'murdered'. There is no murder, Laura. But knowing that someone is helping her with the investigation will calm her down."

"Solange, this entire story doesn't make any sense to me. Are you prepared to pay me 500 francs a day to keep your mother in peace? And how long will you pay for an investigation that

you are sure will lead nowhere? You can prove that something exists, but you can't prove that something doesn't exist."

Solange agreed. "I have noticed that my mother has more than tripled the fee we originally agreed upon. Either she trusts you to be as efficient as Emma Peel, or she is desperate, and wants to make sure you will accept. But I'm sure she'll soon run out of ideas. There are only so many possibilities. At first she suspected that a distant relative was seeking revenge for an old unresolved feud. Now she's convinced that foreign developers are behind the 'murder' because Gastoun didn't want to sell our land to them for a huge development in the hills."

"Does or did your mother work?"

"She taught art history at the Gobelins Art School when we lived in Paris. When my father died, she moved here to look after her alcoholic brother. They were very close as children."

"OK, Solange. Please understand that I have to digest and think about your proposal. I'm quite spontaneous, but I'm not going to jump into the water until I know how deep it is. I'll get back to you in a day or two with an answer."

"Great, thank you Laura for at least considering it. Please take my card. If you have any questions, this is where you can reach me during office hours. If you need to call after hours, my home number is on the back."

Laura looked at the card. "You're the Deputy Director of the Hervé Ricard Foundation in Saint Paul?"

"Recently promoted," Solange smiled modestly. "Until then I ran the Foundation's gallery in Paris."

"How old are you, Solange?" If they want to hire her as a detective, they should get used to her questions, she thought.

"Just a little older than you," Solange replied. Perhaps to avoid further questioning, Solange pecked her on the left cheek, smiled, and turned to go home.

At that moment, there was a sudden, powerful flash of lightning with a deafening clap of thunder, almost simultaneously, and the sky opened up. It was raining like a deluge. Laura quickly climbed into her car and saw Solange, soaked to the bone, walking quietly across the square.

A few minutes later the rain let up a little, but it continued for half an hour. Not wanting to drive in these conditions, Laura sat in her car and tried to digest the events of the morning. She rather wanted to write down her thoughts, or better still, talk to someone. But David wouldn't be back until the following evening at the earliest, and who could she trust in this village? For all she knew, anyone could be Gastoun Giraud's murderer or connected with him in some way. She did not know how this micro-society worked, what its relationships were, what its expectations were, what its grievances were. She didn't know any of them well enough to judge their ability to commit cold-blooded, sordid murder. If it was murder.

While Laura understood Eisabello's desire for justice, Solange puzzled her. She didn't have the slightest doubt that her uncle had committed suicide, yet she was prepared to pay her a lot of money to prove it was murder. Unless she didn't care about money, which Laura didn't believe. The little she had seen of Solange last night and this morning suggested that money was very important to her. The way she dressed, even in private,

the way she spoke and acted, the way she controlled her emotions, all showed that she loved money and power.

The question Laura had to answer was whether she really wanted to get involved. During her last weeks in the cold, grey, and complicated atmosphere of London, she dreamed of her future life in the south of France. She would live a simple life in the sunshine. Owning nothing, living on a shoestring, working just enough to get her through the next day. She would work in the fields under the blue sky and spend her free time walking, writing, reading, and talking to friends. She would have a dog and finally meet the love of her life.

And now this strange proposal puts an end to her dreams. Or doesn’t it? According to Solange, it would only be for a short time, maybe a month, or two at the most. A parenthetical before returning to her dream of simplicity. She better let it rest for now, at least until tomorrow. It's a well-known fact that you shouldn't rush important decisions and always sleep over them. The rain had died down to a drizzle, so she prepared to head home.

'Strange to call it 'home' where I'd lived for only 48 hours,' Laura thought. Where was her 'home' anyway? Did she ever have a 'home'? Not during her childhood in Joburg, of course. Nor in Paris when she was a model, nor in Cape Town when she returned to South Africa. Nor in New York with Samuel, nor in London when they moved to Europe. And certainly not in her tiny one-bedroom flat in Shepherd's Bush, even though she liked Walter at first, like the grandfather she never knew.

Would Tourrettes sur Loup be 'home'? If she accepted Solange's job offer, she could earn enough money to pay the rent in the village a year in advance.

The rain had stopped completely, and the first patches of blue sky were appearing. She started the car and drove towards Vence. A hundred metres down the road she saw blue-eyed Rudi coming out of a door, making a sign with his hand as if he were hitchhiking. She stopped the car. He opened the passenger door and jumped in. He was carrying a fancy briefcase, which looked odd on him.

"Hey," he said. "I'm Rudi. You going to Nice?"

"Hey, I'm Laura. Great to see you again, and no, I'm just going back to Vence, where I live."

Rudi looked around. "Huh, nice little car. A Fiat 124 Spider, one of the first, I think. Something collectors would love."

"I don't know, Rudi. It's not mine and I'm not really into cars. As long as they work well, are fun to drive and don't cost too much, I'm fine. But where's your car? You also drive a collector's item."

"How do you know that?" Rudi looked at her.

She smiled and said, "I saw you on Saturday. I'd just arrived in the village and was waiting for a friend on the terrace of the Café Rossi. You parked your car in front of the church, got out, and walked away with Miri in your arms, Naomi was ten paces behind you. It looked strange. That's why I remember it."

"You know Naomi and Miri?" Rudi asked, looking at her with his blue eyes wide open.

"I met Naomi at Roussil's party last night. It was nice of you to stay with your daughter so Naomi could dance. She's a wonderful dancer, you know."

Rudi did not answer, nor did he answer any of her previous questions. He had turned his head and was looking out of the window on his side. "She needed the car to visit a friend and took Miri with her."

His remark was followed by a moment of uneasy silence. Laura said the first banality that came to mind, "So you're hitchhiking."

Rudi turned slightly to look straight ahead. "Yes, well... that doesn't work here. Locals and tourists don't pick up hitchhikers. I even tried to do what we did in Germany, where it was a great success: I tried to replicate the Red Dot action here."

"Red Dot action?" she asked, "I've never heard of it."

Rudi explained. "In Germany we once organised a boycott of public transport because they wanted to almost double the fares. Since many people relied on public transport, we made a sticker with a big red dot in the middle and gave it to everyone. Cars with the sticker on their windscreen would give people a free ride. You could hail such a car and share the ride as long as the driver was going your way. When you needed to take a different route, you just got out and caught another one. It was a huge success and everyone loved it. But it never caught on here in France. I honestly don't know why."

They had arrived in Vence, where Laura would normally turn left up the hill to David's house, while Rudi would have to turn

right and down towards Nice. "When are you supposed to be in Nice?" Laura asked.

He looked at her in surprise. "Why is that? Well, I have to be at the Faculty of Social Sciences at 2 pm. I've got a meeting with my thesis supervisor this afternoon."

Laura liked him more than she cared to admit. This casual conversation with him after the strange morning discussion put her at ease. She would drive him to the campus. "All right, I'll take you there."

"That's kind of you, but why would you do that?" Rudi asked.

Laura laughed. "That's a strange question, especially coming from a Red Dot activist. Let's say it's a sudden attack of kindness. It happens to me sometimes. Give me a second. I'll open the roof so we can enjoy the French Riviera to the full."

They talked about Rudi's experience of living in Tourrettes sur Loup. His wife's family owned the little pink house at the entrance to the village where she had picked him up. Every time Laura mentioned Naomi and his daughter Miri, he ignored her questions and comments and talked about other things. She didn't insist.

When they reached the coast and turned left onto the coastal road to Nice, Laura casually said, "I heard there was a suicide in Tourrettes a few months ago."

Rudi agreed. "Yes, it was Gastoun. They found him in a little stone shed on his land up in the hills. I liked Gastoun."

"Did you know him well?" she asked.

Rudi looked straight ahead as he answered. "I saw him in the bistro almost every morning for the last few years. While I was getting my coffee, he'd come in and calm his tremors with three 'white balloons'. That's three small glasses of white wine. Sometimes he wouldn't stop talking. I feel I know everything about him and his family. But I didn't see it coming, his suicide. Nobody saw it coming."

Maybe she was being too lenient, but Laura couldn't imagine Rudi as a cold-blooded killer. She trusted her instincts enough to go a little further. "Someone told me it might have been murder."

"What?" Rudi turned to her, looking stunned. "Who said that? That's insane! Murder in Tourrettes sur Loup? And how can you murder someone by hanging? I bet he would have fought like mad. It would take a whole gang of killers. Well, he was a small fellow, at least two or three! I can't even imagine that happening in this nice little village."

"There's the who and the how, but my first question would be if there's a motive for anyone. If he didn't take his own life, who would want him dead?"

"Absolutely. Everyone I know liked Gastoun." Rudi said. "He was a really nice guy, always there to help, always joking, and laughing. Sure, he had a drinking problem, but whether he was sober or drunk, he was always the same. And when he got what he needed, he usually went home."

Rudi pointed to her side. "Make sure you're in the left lane and then just follow the signs to the campus."

There was a moment of silence, then Rudi spoke again. "Some time ago, he told me about the trouble he had with a cousin about something that happened before he was born. But he didn't think it was serious and even joked about it. The only time he was really upset was just after New Year. He said his niece, Solange, was trying to persuade him to sell his land to an Italian developer. They were planning this fancy fortress for the super-rich up in the hills, a weird project called 'Tourrettes in the Sky'. I heard they had designed the place to be accessible only by air, which is delirious. I thought it was all made up, but Gastoun confirmed it. He said the Giraud land was right in the middle of the proposed development. Apparently, they had offered him a lot of money. His niece and sister wanted to sell. Solange was the most insistent. She said Gastoun would not do anything up there anymore. But Gastoun wanted to keep it for Solange. He was sure his niece would regret selling it, like all the other locals who sold their land. He adored his niece."

They arrived at the campus. Rudi opened the door at his side. "Thank you for the ride, Laura. If I didn't have to prepare my notes, I'd invite you for coffee. I'll make it up to you when I see you in Tourrettes. If you want to visit that place up in the hills, I can show you. It's a nice walk too."

"Oh, I'd love that!" It came out without thinking. Laura quickly added, "Good luck with your meeting this afternoon."

He smiled, closed the door, and Laura drove off quickly.

5

Despite her extremely comfortable king-size bed, Laura slept badly, and awoke from a nightmare. In her dream, she was running through a ghost town at night, chased by something unknown. The few people she passed on the street didn't seem to notice her, as if they didn't see her. When she desperately gestured and called out to a faceless woman to get her attention, the woman walked right through her. Laura turned to see her coming out from behind her. The woman walked a few metres, then stopped and turned. Now she had a face, an ugly, twisted smile, full of hate and loathing. It was Simone's face.

As Laura turned to walk away, there was another Simone in front of her. When she looked around, more Simones appeared from everywhere, until a mob of these women surrounded her, all with the same ugly smile and distorted face. They were closing in on her. The crowd of hateful Simones was suffocating, making her sweat and struggling to breathe. It wasn't a feeling of fear, it was much worse. By staring at her, they were draining her of all hope. That's when Laura snapped out of the dream and woke up.

She lay in bed for a moment, staring at the ceiling, then turned to look out the bay window. It was early. The sun was just rising over the sea. She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, feeling empty and disconnected. After a while, put on shorts and a T-shirt and went out onto the terrace. The main house was still quiet, the shutters closed. When she arrived the afternoon before, the main house had already seemed empty. She hadn't seen Birch for a day. Perhaps he had gone off to his kingdom in Scotland.

Looking around the garden, Laura felt strange, somehow distant and detached. She needed to change her mood and decided to go for a swim. As there was no one around, she undressed and went in naked.

She was a good swimmer. When she was young, she learnt to front crawl in the ocean in Durban. The family spent most of their summers there. She had an excellent swimming teacher who told her that the most important thing was to control your breathing. With little else to do, she would swim for hours along the coast. Sharks were rarely mentioned in those days, and nobody cared about her, anyway. Alice usually went into town with Simone, and as long as Laura ate her meals and was home by 8 pm, they left her alone.

The pool in Vence was quite long, probably 20 metres. Laura lost all sense of time. When she got back to the house, the kitchen clock showed she had been swimming for over an hour. Feeling much better, she turned on the fancy coffee maker David got from an American friend. Then she got dressed, filled a large mug with coffee, and went to sit under the pine trees. The combination of exercise and strong coffee restored her spirits. Her usual joie de vivre returned. She was ready to face the world.

'Let's try to be logical, as Samuel used to say', she thought to herself. She needed a job, and she had a very tempting offer. She could earn enough money in a month to fulfil her dream of a simple life and settle down in Tourrettes sur Loup. Why did she hesitate? What was the risk?

She suspected that Solange and her mother didn't have the same expectations. Eisabello was looking for a Hollywood-style

private detective. She wanted to prove that Gastoun's death was murder and bring the killer to justice. Solange was just looking for someone reasonably smart and motivated. Under Eisabello's supervision, this person would gather information to prove to Eisabello that it was a suicide. Note number one: Laura had to clarify this point with both of them.

If Eisabello was prepared to hire Laura Heyns, who had just appeared out of nowhere, and pay her a lot of money, then Solange must have told her mother a completely fictitious story. But Solange did have some accurate information about her. Laura couldn't imagine how she got it. Maybe it was a bluff. Note number two: she had to clear this up with Solange.

As for the job, there are two possibilities: either it was suicide, in which case she is only being paid to make sure they tried everything to convince Eisabello. Or it was murder. And then what? If it was murder, the situation would be completely different. If the killer thinks the case is close, because the police have declared it a suicide, but then discovers that someone is still snooping around, he'll make sure he's not exposed. In any way possible. Which means... Note number three: Laura won't investigate murder! If she ever found the slightest hint of foul play, she'd tell Solange to take the case to the police.

Before she made a final decision, Laura needed to talk to Eisabello and Solange to clarify these three points. It was almost noon. She used David's phone to call Solange. She wanted to meet them in the afternoon. After the call, she'd go to the village and have another pan bagnat.

Solange answered on the second ring. "Hello Laura, how nice to hear your voice. I'm about to go out for lunch. Would you like to join me?"

This wasn't part of her plan, but a good detective has to be flexible, she thought half-jokingly. "OK. Where shall we meet?"

Solange suggested they meet at the Café de la Place in Saint Paul de Vence in half an hour. "It's right at the entrance to the village. They always have a table for me on the terrace. There is a chance of meeting some film stars. It is not unusual to see celebrities like Yves Montand, Serge Reggiani, and others playing a game of pétanque outside the Café."

Laura rolled her eyes. "You don't say. I'm not a celebrity groupie, Solange, but OK, I'll be there."

It was a short and pleasant drive. Saint Paul was different from Tourrettes sur Loup. Despite the similar architecture, Saint Paul lacked the fairytale atmosphere. This was more like Disney World, with tacky, overpriced souvenir, and fake craft shops. A dense crowd lined the streets, especially around the large sand-covered square surrounded by enormous plane trees in front of the Café de la Place. There were a few dozen tourists taking pictures of the pétanque players. Four of the players were quite old and dressed like the locals in Tourrettes sur Loup. Two others wore freshly ironed white silk shirts and posh black tailored trousers. Their faces gave the impression that they were wearing make-up. Laura recognised Yves Montand and Lino Ventura and wondered if they didn't mind being the established tourist attraction of Saint Paul.

The terrace of the Café de la Place was busy. Solange was sitting at a table in a corner, waving. After greeting Laura, Solange explained that she'd already ordered the menu by phone from her office.

"Otherwise we'd have to wait for hours, because I wanted you to try their speciality, and that takes a while to prepare. I asked for oysters to start and then their famous lobster stew."

"To what do I owe the honour of being spoilt by you?" Laura asked.

Solange had noticed Laura's reserved attitude and gave her a warm smile. "Actually, it's not me who's spoiling you. It's the Hervé Ricard Foundation. They're paying for it. But I'm delighted that you've agreed to work with us. It'll be a great relief for my mother."

The waiter's arrival halted Laura's protest. He brought two glasses of champagne and left in a hurry. Solange clinked her glass against Laura’s and said, "To a long friendship."

Laura was taken aback. She'd never thought of Solange as a friend, and it's unlikely she ever will. Since she abhorred hypocrisy and lies, even white lies, she replied: "May kindness guide our thoughts. But Solange, I haven't accepted your job offer yet. First I wanted to meet you and your mother to discuss some important matters."

Solange sat back. "Go ahead," she said.

Her reaction startled Laura. "Right now, before we start eating? And your mother isn't even here," she replied.

Solange laughed. "Why not now? Do you think I'll cancel the meal if you say no? It's best to clear the table before we eat. And I can answer your questions in my mother's name. We have no secrets. I know her well. So why are you afraid? Based on our previous conversation, it seems that your hesitation stems from fear."

Laura hesitated. But why shouldn't she get some answers now? She can always cross-check with Eisabello later. "Okay. I have three things that are bothering me. First, from your point of view, I came out of nowhere. I've only been in the village for a few hours, and I met you less than 48 hours ago. Yet you know facts about me that logically you can't know. You even hinted that you knew a lot more. Can you please explain?"

Solange smiled warmly. "That impressed you, didn't it? I meant to. I wanted to pique your curiosity and make sure you'd get back to me. But the explanation is quite simple. The owner of the house where your friend David lives, Birch Wilson, contacted the Foundation because he wanted to invest in art and needed expert advice. Last Friday he invited me to dinner at his house, and your friend David was there. While Birch was dealing with the caterer, David was showing me around the property and we were on his terrace when you called. I'd overheard parts of your conversation. Sorry, it's my job to be nosy. After the call I questioned David thoroughly."

Solange sipped her champagne. "He was reluctant to give much information, but I got your name and some details of your past life, such as your time as a model in Paris. I knew the artistic director of Balmain when I ran the Ricard Foundation Gallery in Paris, so I called him. He remembered you after all these years.

I got the impression that he'd liked you and was sorry to see you go. I told him I was thinking of hiring you and he recommended you enthusiastically. He praised your independent spirit, your determination, and your willingness to put in long hours of sometimes arduous work."

"That explains why you knew more about me than you would normally know about someone new in the village. But why would you do that? Why would you ask about me?"

"Laura, you cannot imagine the extent of my mother's obsession. Since the police closed the case, she's become increasingly desperate. She refuses to talk about anything else. I hear it every time I visit her. She is impervious to reason. She's a monomaniac. I've even asked her to see a psychologist. She would never see one. Why should she? From her point of view, there is nothing wrong with her. So, I went to see the psychologist. He described her state of mind as 'cognitive dissonance'. If you express your disagreement with her, she will ignore it. Present her with empirical evidence and she questions your credentials. Present a logical case and she cannot understand your point of view. Because of her strong morals and love for her late brother, it's easier for her to rationalise her beliefs than to change them. Words alone won't sway her. According to the psychologist, she is the only one who can heal herself. He suggested I step aside so that she can investigate for herself. She is the one who must draw the conclusions."

After another sip of champagne, Solange continued. "After that I was desperate to find someone to help her. I can't hire a professional investigator. In France, they risk losing their licence if they investigate a crime, let alone a potential murder. Anyway,

my mother thinks it would be unproductive to hire a detective. Most of them are retired police officers who rely on their connections with former colleagues for information. And they wouldn't tolerate her getting involved, breathing down their necks all the time. We needed to find someone like you, an unknown face, new to the area, someone alert, honest, and available. But such a person is not an everyday occurrence, they do not appear unexpectedly. Well, you did. My mother had a young man in mind, whereas I have no prejudices. I embraced the opportunity of your arrival, and I remain convinced that you are my saviour."

"To appease your mother? This brings me to my second and third points. You believe that this investigation is fake. According to you, my job is to confirm what you already know, that it's a suicide. I don't know how to do that, but let's leave that aside for the moment. Your mother is convinced it's murder. She expects me to prove it and bring the killer to justice. Let me be very clear, Solange: I will not investigate a murder. As soon as I get the slightest hint that something is fishy, I will give you all the information I have and get out of there."

"Laura, I have already repeated that there is no murderer. It's clear, not just to me, but to everyone except my mother: this is not a murder investigation. Unfortunately, this is another case of suicide because of alcoholism, like countless others in France. Your role will be to follow my mother's leads, to investigate, and to repeat the procedures already carried out by the police four months ago. By investigating the matter herself, my mother will be forced to admit that suicide is the only plausible explanation. However, Laura, I implore you not to disclose to my mother your

unwillingness to pursue a murder investigation. It would render you unqualified, as my mother believes this to be a murder. And now let's move on to more serious matters. Here comes our hors d'oeuvre!"

The waiter brought their starter, a dozen oysters each. As he placed the plates on the table and chatted with Solange, Laura glanced to her left and spotted two men sitting nearby. Instead of facing each other, as most people do in a restaurant, they were both facing their way. Laura briefly wondered if they had overheard. Then Solange said, "Bon appétit," and they started their meal.

They made small talk, carefully avoiding topics on which they might disagree. At one point, towards the end of the meal, Laura asked Solange if she enjoyed living and working in Paris. Solange surprised her with her excitement as she described her work. How she appreciated the independence, freedom, and creative opportunities she had in running the gallery. How she enjoyed the vibrant life she led in the city with all the famous people she knew. Laura asked her why she'd come back. Solange's mood changed abruptly. At first she didn't answer. Laura thought she didn't want to and was ready to change the subject when Solange said, "They discovered problems and fired the previous deputy director. Given my qualifications and experience in Paris, they offered me the job, along with a substantial pay rise."

Feeling that it would be impolite to inquire further about a delicate subject in which she had no interest anyway, Laura changed the subject. "I'll pass on dessert, Solange. I'm completely full and can't eat any more, not even a tiny bite.

Please give my thanks to the Foundation Ricard. And thanks for being honest with me. If you agree with the limitations I have set, I am willing to accept your work proposal. I will contact your mother to schedule a meeting and discuss our strategy."

"Wonderful!" Solange exclaimed. "You are making two people happy. Well, my mother will be overjoyed and I am relieved. We'll call my mother right away. It's after three and the post office will be open. It's just around the corner on our way back."

They entered the Café de la Place and went to the counter. Solange spoke to the man behind the cash register for a moment. He looked at Laura and nodded. Then Solange walked her back to the exit.

As they turned the corner behind the bistro, Solange explained. "Hervé is the owner. I told him you work for the Foundation and if you come in for lunch or dinner, he should put it on the Foundation's bill."

"Can you do that?" she asked.

"Executive privilege," Solange laughed. "The Foundation pays a lot of tax. We can't deduct enough overheads."

As they crossed the small street in front of the post office, Laura looked left and right as usual. She noticed two guys standing fifty metres away, near the Café de la Place, looking at both of them. They were the same two who'd been sitting next to her on the terrace. One of them had red hair, the other brown, and a beard.

"Solange, do you know those two guys?" Laura asked her.

Solange turned around, but the two men had also turned the other way, and Solange could only see their backs. "No, why? Come on, there's only one phone box here, and it's probably still empty."

Her mother picked up immediately. Solange explained the reason for their call and handed the receiver to Laura.

Eisabello was thrilled. "Hello, Laura. I'm so glad you've agreed to work with us. Do you have time to come over now?"

"Sure, I can be there in half an hour. See you then." Laura hung up, lost in thought.

The conversation with Eisabello was almost cordial. In contrast to her daughter's mannered friendliness, Eisabello was simple and personable. Solange's words seemed carefully chosen and purposeful, while Eisabello was spontaneous, generous, and practical.

She had prepared iced tea and 5,000 new francs for Laura. "This will get you started. Expenses are separate, please keep the receipts. I need your full commitment, and I don't want such mundane matters as money to divert your attention."

Eisabello had also prepared a copy of the file she had received from the police and added her observations. "You can read it quietly at home. To start our investigation, I suggest you gather all the information you can about the company behind the 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project. It's called Meridione Asset Management SpA."

"Sorry Eisabello, that seems way too broad," she said. "What information would we be particularly interested in?"

Eisabello seemed pleased that she had asked. "I spent some time in the public library in Nice reading about criminal investigations. To get a glimpse of the hidden part of a company's iceberg, look no further than its finances and politics. We'll need their legal and financial records, their banking, and business connections. We also need their political links in Italy and on the French Riviera. I won't be idle. I will reactivate some contacts I had in Italy when I worked at the Gobelins Art School in Paris. We'll need all the help we can get."

To get her up to speed, Eisabello suggested Laura read the police file and her notes. After that, she should visit the crime scene and, since it's in the same place, the site where the 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project was planned. Laura knew who could help her there.

As she got up to leave, Laura noticed Eisabello was hesitating. "Before you leave... Perhaps I should inform you of another possibility, which I have now all but discarded. If you have time, please sit down again for a moment so I can explain it to you."

Once Laura had sat down at the table, Eisabello looked at her. She was obviously embarrassed. "It may seem far-fetched to you, but at first I suspected that an old family feud had led to Gastoun's murder. A distant cousin's husband got it into his head that his branch of the family had been unfairly left out of our great-grandfather's inheritance."

"It's a story that's been going on for over twenty years, ever since he married my cousin. But it flared up again last year at his daughter's wedding. We'd been invited by his wife, but when we arrived at the venue, he started an argument that ended in a general brawl. It has to be said that some guests were quite drunk. We left the party, but the next day the man came to see us in Tourrettes with a friend. They were completely drunk and immediately started arguing. At first the man accused us of ruining his daughter's wedding. But then he brought out his old grievances about the inheritance from over sixty years ago. We hadn't even been born yet! When Gastoun got angry and pushed them towards the door, the man struggled and threatened Gastoun: 'You'll be sorry, you're a thief. I'll kill you.' Two months later, Gastoun was found in the shed."

That possibility sounded unlikely to Laura, but you never know. "It is a phrase that half of humanity has used at least once in their lives. People say things without meaning it, Eisabello. And he was drunk."

Eisabello agreed. "That's what the police said. They questioned him, and he has some sort of alibi. As I explained, I have rejected that idea as well. But now I wonder if we shouldn't at least talk to him to make sure we have missed no leads."

They agreed to meet on Thursday afternoon to visit the cousin together. She lived in La Colle, a nearby village.

As Laura left, Eisabello held her hand for a moment and looked into her eyes. Her expression was soft and happy. "I know that your primary motives differ from ours, but my

instincts tell me you are a good woman. Deep down, we share something, a drive, a need for truth and justice. I'm glad to be doing this investigation with you."

For a moment Laura wondered if she had misjudged Eisabello. It sounded a little too much like flattery. But Eisabello's expression seemed genuine, and she had spent several months under duress, which makes people emotional.

"It's a shared pleasure, Eisabello," she said. "I'll do my best not to disappoint you."

"I know you won't," Eisabello replied. "Please keep me informed."

Eisabello had given Laura an elegant leather briefcase with the file and money in it. Leaving it in the boot of her car, Laura walked to the Café Rossi. She needed to buy a neutral outfit and thought someone there might be able to point her toward the nearest shopping mall. It was after 5 pm and the Café was filling up. As she approached, a bus from Vence arrived. Among the dozen people getting off was the one she was looking for, Rudi.

He stopped to talk to McCampbell, the painter, and waved to another table. Fred came out of the bistro and seeing Laura, said aloud, "Here comes my favourite addition to our community. Hello, Laura!" Fred greeted her with a peck on the cheek.

Rudi turned and smiled. "Hello, Laura. Can I get my revenge?"

"Not with a drink, Rudi. I have to ask you something else," she replied. Then to the girl who had just passed with an empty tray, "A panaché for me, please."

Laura said hello to McCampbell, and they all sat down at his table. As she found out much later, McCampbell was actually a Danish painter who had lived in Tourrettes sur Loup since the early 60s. At some point in his life, he had invented a Scottish heritage, including the colours and patterns of the kilt he wore all year round. With his long, thinning grey hair, and scruffy beard, he was a convincing image of his imaginary ancestors. You could hear his unmistakable hearty laugh from afar.

They joked around for a while until Laura told them she was looking for a place to rent in the village. "There's Martine's house, down the alley from my workshop," said McCampbell. "It's been empty for a few months now, since Martine moved to Ibiza."

"Do you know this place?" Laura asked, "How big is it and who owns it?"

Fred replied, "I've visited Martine several times. It's big, with three large rooms on top of each other and a terrace on the roof. The kitchen on the ground floor and the bath on the second floor are open, separated by only a half-height wall. I think it needs some work. I could ask Martine's grandmother if she'd be willing to rent it to you. She's the owner."

"That would be great, Fred. Please ask her. I need something else. Rudi, you kindly offered to show me the area where they plan to build 'Tourrettes in the Sky'. When would you be available?"

Fred laughed. "If you are interested in buying into the project, Rudi is not the man to talk to." Laura smiled at him but didn't respond.

"Tomorrow morning if you like," Rudi said, "the earlier the better, before it gets too hot."

"That's fine with me. What time do they open the Café?" she asked.

"We can meet here at seven," Rudi replied.

"Perfect," she said. "Gentlemen, I would love to stay and chat, but I have a lot to do tonight and as you heard, I'll need to get up early tomorrow. Have a good evening, everyone." She kissed them goodbye and left.

When she got back to David's, a dozen cars behind the brightly lit main house suggested that Birch had returned and even had guests. Laura drove up to David's carport, parked the car, and went into David's house. As she opened the bay window of the kitchen and stepped out onto the patio, she could hear the discreet sounds of a small reception or garden party. The people were casually dressed. Some were standing in small groups with a glass in one hand, others were seated at tables discussing and looking at documents. A young woman was walking around with a tray of canapes, and a young man with a bottle of champagne.

She went back into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water and sat down in a deckchair at the far end of her terrace. She'd taken the designer briefcase with her and pulled out the police file. It wasn't very thick. One page listed Gastoun's personal details, one page covered the autopsy, one and a half

pages described the crime scene, and five pages detailed the investigation.

In short, Gastoun Giraud was 55 years old when he died, he was never married, and his tax address was Tourrettes sur Loup. Apart from a sister and her daughter in Tourrettes, a few distant cousins lived in towns and villages in the area. He had no older relatives. So much for the Mediterranean diet, Laura thought.

Time of death was around midnight. An autopsy was performed 36 hours after his death. Gastoun died from strangulation. All the physical indicators were consistent, such as cerebral ischaemia, vertebro-spinal lesions and pharyngeal bruising. His only health problem was a rotten liver. According to the coroner, he could have lived another three to five years before major health problems would have set in. He had 'only' 0.5g/l alcohol in his blood, which isn't much for an alcoholic. No other drugs or chemicals were found in his system. His last meal was more than four hours before he died, as his stomach and small intestine were empty. There were no signs of a struggle on his skin, such as scratches or blue marks. His fingernails were clean.

The investigation report was chronological. A resident of Tourrettes sur Loup, whose name has been blacked out, found the body. This person lived further down the Chemin Saint-Martin, near the village. He was walking his dog when it went into the shed and didn't come out. The witness went to see why and found the body. He said he had touched nothing, went straight home, and called the police, who arrived less than an hour later. This witness had a solid alibi for the time of death.

According to the officer who wrote the report, it seemed obvious to him it was a suicide. He found an old wooden chair, overturned, and close to the body. There were no signs of a struggle on the floor. The only window was closed. They found some old cigarette butts and old shotgun shells from hunters near the shed, but nothing suspicious. Inside, they found fingerprints from a dozen different people, and outside, footprints from probably as many different shoes. The footprints outside the shed were covered with dust because of the storm that had been blowing for several days. There were no footprints inside, apart from Gastoun's, the witness's shoes and the dog's paws.

Laura looked up. Why were there a dozen different fingerprints inside, but only Gastoun's and the witness's footprints? Still, no other footprints in the shed meant it was definitely suicide. Unless a gang of bats hung him there. Eisabello must have read the report. How could she doubt its conclusion?

The police interviewed a dozen people, including the nearest neighbour, who lived around a bend in the path, 500 metres away, with his wife, and three dogs. They both went to bed around 10 pm and were asleep at the time of death. Their three dogs had been barking a lot that evening, but they put it down to the noise of the strong wind and suspected nothing else. They knew Gastoun well, but had no special relationship with him. Other villagers confirmed this.

The motorable road stopped in front of their gate and from there it was a rocky donkey track. There were no visible marks on the track.

The police also questioned the relative mentioned by Eisabello, who'd threatened Gastoun. He had a solid alibi, confirmed by several people. The other interviews revealed nothing important.

A brown envelope contained some photographs, but none of the body. Either the police or Eisabello had removed them. The photos showed the interior of the shed, with an overturned chair off-centre, footprints by the entrance, a distant view of the shed and a close-up of Gastoun's face. It seemed recent, for he looked fifty-five, even over sixty, she would have guessed.

Laura looked closely at the photo of the inside of the shed, but saw nothing special. Better to look on site. After reading Eisabello's notes, she closed the file.

The reception at the main house had entered a new phase. Everyone was sitting close together now, with champagne glasses and two ice buckets with bottles in the middle. Voices were louder and documents were closed.

Laura took a sip of water, went inside to fetch her writing pad, when the phone was ringing. She went into the kitchen to answer it. It was Leon of the Café Rossi in Tourrettes sur Loup.

"Could you come?" he asked. "There's an elderly woman in the village who's behaving like the Queen of England. She is threatening to cause a scandal unless someone reveals your whereabouts."

The writing pad fell out of Laura's hand. Simone had found her.

6

Laura was stunned, unable to speak. She put the phone down on the buffet and looked at the wall in front of her. How had Simone found her so fast?

"Laura?" She faintly heard Léon's voice on the receiver, "What shall I tell her? She's in the café now." In the background she heard Simone's voice. Her stomach tightened. She picked up the phone.

"I'm sorry about that woman's behaviour, Léon. Please tell her I'm on my way."

After hanging up, she leaned against the wall, stunned. Why was this woman giving her such a hard time? She had practically kicked Laura out of the house when she was eighteen and dumped her in Paris. Not before trying in vain to set her up with a steward they'd met on the flight from Athens to Rome. She'd relentlessly tried to ruin Laura's reputation, her relationships and her life.

But Laura knew it was also her fault. The many letters she wrote to Simone and Alice might have revealed her weakness, because that's what it was. She had this terrible tendency to forgive her tormentors and beg them for love.

She took the car and drove down to the village. Her mind was strangely empty. She had no idea what to do. When she passed in front of his house, Rudi just left. Laura stopped the car but stayed inside while Rudi approached.

"Hi Laura, you're back? I thought you were busy. I just wanted to see who was hanging around. Fancy a drink?"

"I've got a problem, Rudi. Léon phoned, there's a woman in the café asking for me."

Rudi looked at her, "A woman? Who is she, do you know her?"

Laura looked at him briefly, but turned back to face the road. "Legally, she's my mother. But de facto she's not. It's a complicated story, I'll explain it some other time. She cheated her way into my life and has always tried to make it miserable."

"I didn't ask her to come. I don't even know how she found me here." There was a moment of silence, then Laura looked up at him and asked, "Would you mind staying with me to greet her? It would throw her off and give me the advantage of surprise."

"Because of my appearance?" Rudi smiled.

Laura laughed, "That too. She'll be floored!"

"What's her name?" Rudi asked.

Laura looked straight ahead. "Her name is Simone."

Ever since that day in Brussels four years ago, she has used Simone's first name when thinking of her. It all started when Simone called her at Samuel's in the middle of the night, almost hysterical, to tell Laura that her husband had left her. She said she was stranded, penniless, with her cousin in Brussels, who couldn't look after her either. Laura must come immediately and bring some money. And they must find a suitable institution for her in Brussels, because nobody wants her.

Later, Laura found out that Simone was actually living with Jacob in a luxury Jewish retirement home in Joburg. Her husband had never left her. On the contrary. He had paid for her trip to Europe and given her a large sum of money to buy presents for the family - including Laura.

She should have known better, but Simone had never lied to her so blatantly. It was the last time Laura fell for it. She grabbed whatever money she could at such short notice and got on the next plane. When she arrived at the cousin's house in Brussels in the early afternoon, the housekeeper told her that Simone was fine. She had invited her cousin to lunch at Brugmann's in the city centre and then the two of them had planned to go shopping all afternoon.

Laura returned to London. But it was on the 17th of July. Two bombs had exploded in the City. It was chaos. When she finally got home, after being stuck in a taxi for hours, Samuel told her that Simone had rung earlier. She complained that Laura was being ungrateful by refusing to see her when she'd always been her favourite child. When Samuel replied that she had taken a large sum of money and flown to Brussels that morning to meet her, Simone said that Laura had lied to him. She was probably seeing another man. She hadn't wanted to get involved before, but she should have told him that Laura was a troubled child with a long history of deception.

That was the last she heard of Simone. Until now.

Laura expected to find Simone in the Café Risso, arguing with Léon and the villagers, but she didn't see her when she parked the car in the square. They walked up to the bistro. As they

entered the bar, heads turned. One of them was Jonas, a Lithuanian sculptor who lived in the village.

Léon greeted her. "I don't mean to be rude, Laura, but your mother is quite a mouthful."

Jonas grinned, "She good bossing, that's sure thing."

"Where is she?" Laura asked.

Jonas replied. "Leslie ask her, come 'Chez Grandmère' for eating somesing."

"What?" Laura couldn't believe it. Leslie was a painter and a friend of McCampbell's. Although, according to Fred, they were notorious rivals, competing in everything, especially female favours.

"Yes, true, no joke," said Jonas. "Vhen she vas here before, she speak loud, you know, everyone hear. She say you not give her your exact address and ask if someone go viz her to your place. I don't know vhat between you and your mozer, but I don't vant interfere, so I don't tell her you at David's. I say you only come a veek ago, and ve not know eizer. She no believe, keep talking, but sit at ze table. Zen Leslie ask if he can give her somesing to drink. Zey start talking, and she calm down. Zey leave about ten minutes ago."

"Thank you, Jonas," she touched his arm, and they left Café Rossi.

"And now?" Rudi asked.

Laura looked at him, a little lost. "Knowing her, she has already started preparing Leslie to become the spearhead of

her mission to discredit me in the village. If you have a moment, let's sit down on that bench over there. I need to think."

They walked to the bench under a tree in front of the church. "I have to get her to leave. Go back to Brussels, or better still, to Joburg, or to the moon. If I just ignore her, she'll get hysterical and nobody has any idea what will happen, including her."

"I can tell her you went to Germany to see my family," Rudi suggested.

Laura shook her head. "No, Rudi, I don't want to involve your family. She is capable of travelling there. And I don't like lies. I have to make it clear to her that the game is over. I never want to see her again and I don't care what she thinks or does. Let her spread her stink. She'll do it anyway, that's what she's here for. I'll tell her now. Where is the restaurant 'Chez Grandmère'?"

" Come, I'll show you," Rudi said as he stood up.

The restaurant was in the old village and had no terrace. The dining room was small, with only eight tables. They had opened the door and the two windows.

Simone faced the wall. All Laura could see was her broad back. When Leslie looked at her agape, Simone turned. Laura had always found Simone beautiful in the old monochrome photos she'd seen as a child. But now she looked even worse than ever before. The ugliness of her character had clearly stained her appearance.

For a moment Simone looked sternly at Rudi, who was standing next to Laura. Then she turned to Laura and said in French, loud enough for everyone to hear: " Come in, Laura, and

give your mum a hug. I'm so pleased to see you! I can't believe you'd leave your mum waiting in the village square with those ignorant yokels who don't know how to behave towards a lady. Is this the right way? I didn't know where you were, no one would tell me. It was only when I threatened to complain to the prefect that the person in the bistro finally called you. Come and give your mum a hug!”

Laura didn't move. "What do you want?"

Simone was prepared for a defiant response as she didn't seem surprised. At least she isn't continuing this silly mummy act, Laura thought.

Eyeing Rudi, Simone weighed the options of a dismissive remark or his potential usefulness. No doubt she chose the latter as she smiled at him.

Then her eyes returned to Laura. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Laura looked at her with what she hoped was a disinterested, detached expression. "What do you want?" she repeated.

There was a slight change in Simone's demeanour, a flicker of annoyance in her eyes. "Laura, this is no way to greet your mother, who has always loved and cared for you, who raised you, and sacrificed the best years of her life for you!"

Laura looked around and saw that the other guests were looking at her, and so was the owner of the restaurant. The cook even stepped out of the kitchen and stood in the doorway. Simone had started her show and was holding the attention of the audience.

It took Laura a lot of effort to stay calm. "If you came here to see me, I don't want to see you. You can take a taxi to the airport and never come back."

Turning to Leslie, Simone made sure her words were loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "See what I mean, Leslie?" she said. "As cheeky as a tramp!"

Then her voice quavered. "I made countless sacrifices to give her the best education, considering her limited abilities. I even took her to Paris and got her into high fashion. What did she do? She ran away and came back to her mum. Then I found her a decent man to marry, but she fled to the States with a lefty. God knows how she made a living there. I know, but I'm ashamed to tell you. Of course, the man never married her."

Laura's mouth was agape. She wondered if Simone was losing her mind. She never would have guessed Simone talked about her like that.

"You see Leslie," Simone continued, her voice firm again, "now she's standing behind me like an idiot. In ten minutes she'll come and beg me to forgive her insolence. I just feel sorry for the boy next to her. He doesn't know what he's in for. Someone should warn him that she'll use him and then move on. That's her personality. She's a harlot, she can't help it, it's all she's ever done."

That was vile. Laura turned away. Her eyes blurred. She felt tears, but she didn't care. She started walking, not knowing where she was going. After a while, she noticed Rudi was following her.

"Have you got a cigarette, Rudi?"

"No, I don't smoke," he said.

"Me neither," she said. "I gave it up a year ago. But I need something to calm my nerves."

Rudi looked at her. "Why don't you come for a walk? That's what I do when things aren't going well."

They walked for a while in silence until they got to the big rock plateau above the village. Even though the sun had already set, the view was still amazing, with the village perched on its promontory and the rolling wooded hills stretching down to meet the coast. Beyond Tourrettes sur Loup, you could see the town of Vence with the first lights, and beyond that, the hills east of Nice sloping down to the sea. There was a plane taking off from the airport.

"Let's sit down for a moment, please," she asked Rudi. They admired the view for a long time in silence.

Then Laura began to talk. She'd never talked about her life before. Well, David knew parts of it. But that day, she felt sorry for herself and needed to confide in someone who would just listen. Simone had brutally opened an infected wound that she had neglected for too long.

Laura spoke of the transaction that had started it all. Her childhood of rejection, lies, deception, and beatings. Her meaningless life amidst the jet set of Paris. The glimmer of hope that appeared in Cape Town. The tedium of glamour in New York and London, interrupted only by the regular appearances of Simone trying to destroy what she'd built. She spoke of her separation from Samuel and her deliberate seclusion in London for a year, trying to rebuild her self-esteem and emotional

strength. And how she'd imagined a simple, happy life in the south of France.

Rudi didn't interrupt, nor did he ask questions or make any comments afterwards. In the end Laura felt better. To lighten the mood, she mentioned her plan to get a dog once she had settled into her house.

"And children?" asked Rudi. Laura looked at him a little surprised. That's a rather unexpected question, she thought.

She had pushed the idea of children to the back of her mind. When she was a child, she dreamed of having a big family. She imagined a loving husband and many children, at least eight or ten, perhaps on a farm in the bush with lots of animals. Although they would not be raising animals for slaughter. Her husband would be a doctor, flying his small plane to visit Bushman tribes in remote areas. She would be a nurse, running a health clinic for local people. But later that dream fizzled out. Somehow, she always ended up in big cities. Childless.

"I would like to have many children, a big family," she finally said. "And what about you? I mean, not for the children. But for your life. It's clear that you're unhappy right now. I can understand that. Do you think you'll find happiness in life once your broken heart is mended? Are you living up to your professional expectations and fulfilling your dreams? Are you on the right track?"

"No." Rudi's reply was immediate, followed by a pause. "No, it feels like a dead end," he added.

Then, after another pause, he continued. "Privately, you already know. But also professionally. I realise that I've gone

down the wrong path. In Germany, I was naïve and idealistic, convinced that capitalism is the ultimate cause of all that's wrong, and that those in power will not give it up without a fight. But I have always been opposed to violence. I believed you can avoid it and bring about actual change if you first try to understand and then act accordingly. That's what science does. While my comrades were idealising Cuba, China, or the Soviet Union, I was looking at history. I realised that revolution only ever replaces the ruling elite with another elite. The new one will preach different ideologies and use different symbolism, but in the end, they will have the same ambitions. Just like those they've just overthrown, they will succumb to the temptation of power for their personal gain."

After a brief pause, he continued. "I believed the social sciences could create genuine change by comprehending society and enhancing its rules and structure. But after years at the university, I've seen the same mechanism at work. Jobs and research funds are granted based on who you know, academic squabbles, and odious intrigues that affect university life."

His words were bitter. Laura felt compelled to cheer him up. "There are alternative ways of doing things. Just write books."

Rudi shrugged. "There are a few social scientists who write books, publish papers, or even appear on television. Unfortunately, they have less impact on society than a blockbuster like Star Wars. They're part of a subdued left and have become just another form of entertainment. As for sociologists in private companies, advertising agencies, polling organisations, or the government, they change nothing. They consolidate the existing power structure."

He looked at her for a while, then smiled and said, "So I'm just muddling along. Telling myself that I'm practicing what Horace called 'carpe diem'."

He stood up, gave her his hand and asked, "Shall we?"

They stood there for a moment, close, facing each other. Laura felt that they both longed to exchange tenderness, but neither of them dared. They were both afraid of being misunderstood, of taking advantage of the other's current vulnerability. Then Rudi did the next best thing to a kiss. He put his arms around her and pulled her close. They both laughed. There was more understanding in that laugh than words could express.

They separated in the square, agreeing to meet at seven the next morning in the bistro, to visit the building site.

As she walked to her car, Laura noticed Leslie talking to a local, both of them staring at her. Leslie's expression wasn't inviting, but she changed direction and walked up to them. They both turned and walked away. Laura called out, "Hello Leslie, please wait."

The villager kept walking while Leslie stopped and turned, a contemptuous sneer on his face.

"Has she gone?" Laura asked.

"What do you care?" Leslie retorted. "I've never seen anyone treat their mother as badly as you did today."

"Leslie, you know nothing about me or my history with this woman. You shouldn't judge a relationship you know nothing about."

Leslie's face hardened even more. "I know what your mother told me, and that's enough. Shame on you!"

"And you don't find the way she talked about me shocking?" Laura wondered.

Leslie was furious now. "No, I don't. This woman has given up so much for you. She was there for you when no one else was. She has always tried to help you. Now that she's old and her husband has left her, she comes to you for help and a little support. And you blow her off in the most disgusting way, in front of everyone. You are a disgrace!"

His tirade infuriated Laura. "How can you believe that crap, Leslie? It's all bullshit. Nothing she's told you has an ounce of truth in it. Don't you ever check what people tell you before you believe it, or worse, repeat it to others?"

Leslie pointed his finger in the air. "Don't you dare tell me what to do! You don't have the moral probity to give advice!" He turned to leave.

"You didn't tell me if she left," she called after him. He didn't look at her, just raised his right fist, middle finger extended.

That was promising. It wasn't the first time Simone had turned up to disrupt Laura's life. But she'd never launched a public smear campaign before. Whether by luck or cunning, she'd found just the right person to carry on her dirty work after she'd gone. Leslie seemed to be a bitter old man, full of regret for life's missed opportunities, easily impressed and manipulated, and in search of a moral mission. He would now spread the hatred she had sown in him. There was nothing left

for Simone to do here. Laura was sure she'd gone. Satisfied. Mission accomplished.

Laura got in her car and drove back to Vence.

7

When Laura arrived at the Café Rossi at seven sharp the next morning, Rudi was already standing in the open door with a cup of coffee in his hand. Laura had got up early and already taken her coffee at home, so Rudi suggested that they leave immediately.

“I want to show you the future building site from above, you can better understand the strategic importance of the Giraud property for the promoter. On the way back, we can look at their land from the ground. There's a road up the mountain to get above the site, but it's rough, so we'll take my car. Yours won't cope with these roads."

Rudi's old Peugeot was funny. The front doors opened backwards, which made getting in quite unusual. From inside, above the metallic dashboard, Laura could see large parts of the flat, pointed bonnet through the windscreen. The car was spacious and more comfortable than one might think.

They were heading in the direction she had come from four days ago. Only four days, yet it felt like months to her! It was early for both of them and they drove in silence. After a few kilometres, Rudi turned right onto a narrow road, just wide enough for his car.

"What would happen if someone came the other way?" Laura asked.

Rudi looked at her in surprise. "Didn't they teach you that when you got your driving licence? Whoever drives upwards has priority. Well, it doesn't always work that way in France.

There are a lot of bullies on the roads here who will push their way through or simply block you until you move over. And some drivers cannot reverse, in which case it may be quicker to drive backwards instead."

The gravel road was rough, winding up the steep mountain in countless hairpin bends. "When it's hot, I have to stop halfway up to let the water cool down," explained Rudi. "And on the way down, I have to stop halfway to let the brakes cool down. She's an old lady, after all." Laura knew that in France, cars are female and trucks are male.

After she had lost count of the number of bends, they reached a beautiful, partly wooded plateau. It continued to the right, while to the left she could see a deep, narrow valley. In the background, the steep mountain rose for another three or four hundred metres. Rudi continued to follow the road to the right, which was getting worse.

The car bobbed like a boat on short waves. "This road is only maintained during the hunting season," Rudi explained, "but it gets better further on." They passed a group of large old buildings that looked abandoned.

Laura admired the scenery. It reminded her of her long walks on Table Mountain behind Cape Town. The same short, windswept vegetation interspersed with rocky outcrops, and the same amazing view over the edge to her right.

After a while Rudi parked the car in the shade of some trees. "We'll walk from here. It's not far."

A narrow path led to the edge of the plateau. From there, the view of the coast to the south was breathtaking. She

estimated that about fifty kilometres of the Côte d'Azur stretched out in front of them. She could see from a mountain range on the right to what looked like a decent sized town on the left.

Rudi was doing his job as her guide. "The peninsula in front of us is called Cap d'Antibes. On the left you can see Nice and, on the right, the Esterel mountain."

"Now, if you look down the ridge in front of us, you will see a very large indentation in the mountain wall. Apparently, it's about one hundred acres. That's where they want to build 'Tourrettes in the Sky'. Even though it's 200 metres below the edge where we're standing, the view from down there is similar to what you see from up here."

He pointed to the left. "Over there, coming from behind the huge boulder, you can see a path. If you follow it for a bit, it bends slightly towards us, and about 100 metres further on you can see a stone shed. That's where they found Gastoun, on the edge of the Giraud estate, which stretches from the stone shed to that group of tall pines. As you can see, their land covers a huge chunk almost in the middle of the development project. If the Giraud don't sell, the project will fall apart. The developer wouldn't be able to cut off the area to build an isolated fortress for the super-rich."

"From up here, what you are explaining seems obvious," she said. "But would the developers resort to murder if someone obstructed their project? And murder in such a strange way?"

Rudi looked out to sea. After a while he said, "It's almost a cultural matter. In the United States they would probably just

shoot him in the street. In Corsica, they would bomb his house in the village. And in Sicily, he would disappear from the face of the earth. But in France, in Tourrettes sur Loup? I don't know. It seems unreal."

After another moment he added, "Which doesn't mean it's impossible." He looked at her. "What do you care, Laura? You didn't even know Gastoun."

Obviously, she had to explain herself to him. This morning, as she sat on her terrace with her coffee, she thought about it. Rudi could help her a lot with her research. As a social scientist, he knew where and how to get the information she needed. And her instincts told her that she could trust him. Sure, she could be mistaken, but if she wasn't prepared to take a reasonable amount of risk, she shouldn't have taken the job.

"Rudi, let's sit down on that rock over there and I'll explain." He raised both eyebrows but complied.

She took a deep breath and began. "Promise to keep what I'm about to tell you in the strictest confidence. You can't tell anyone, not even Naomi. When I'm finished, you'll understand. All right?"

He nodded, looking a little worried. Laura went on. "Eisabello doesn't think it was suicide. She is convinced that Gastoun was murdered and has asked me to help her investigate." She let that sink in.

Rudi's eyes widened. "Are you a flic?" 'Flic' is a popular, somewhat derogatory French term for a police officer.

"No, I'm not even a private detective. Until Monday, I had no idea I'd be doing this. I would have laughed if you had told me that on Monday morning. Eisabello's daughter Solange approached me."

She explained the whole situation to Rudi without holding back, which meant telling him that she was being paid for her work. "One reason I accepted was that I needed work. I'm broke."

Rudi smiled. "And the other?"

"Well, that's the main reason," she admitted, "but I also like Eisabello and understand her. If I can help her find peace again, that would be the other reason."

Rudi looked at her. "If Eisabello is right, you're taking an enormous risk. If I..."

She interrupted him. "I've made it very clear to Solange that I won't investigate murder. If there's even the slightest hint of it, I'm out. According to Solange, there is no risk of this being a murder case, none. In her eyes, we're conducting a fictional investigation, a kind of therapy for her mother to get back on solid ground. My role is to help and support Eisabello, who can't do the job alone. By the way, after reading the police report last night, it seems clear to me it was a suicide."

Rudi stood up, stretched, and turned back to her. "OK, let's assume it was. If that's the case, why are you asking me to keep it a secret?"

She stood up as well and looked at him seriously. "I'm asking you to keep it a secret for my safety, for the one per cent or even

zero dot one per cent chance that it was murder. No one must know that I'm snooping around. And I'm telling you this because I may need your help. That is, if you are willing to help me.”

Rudi grinned. "You want me to play detective too?"

She smiled. "No, but I need information on Eisabello's prime suspect, the Italian company Meridione Asset Management SpA. They are behind the 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project. I'm sure you know where to find what I need."

Rudi was surprised. "You say 'prime suspect'. Are there others?"

"This afternoon we're visiting the distant relative you mentioned yesterday, the one who had a run-in with Gastoun," she replied. "He's already been cleared by the police, but Eisabello wants to talk to him to get to the bottom of it."

Rudi still appeared hesitant. "What information do you need about the Italian company?"

She took another deep breath before answering. "I want to see their legal and financial records, banking information, business connections, political ties, and details of investors in Italy and the French Riviera. Anything unusual that has been published about them in the Italian and French press would also be helpful."

Rudy seemed amused. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"You already sound like Inspector Laura," Rudy laughed. "But I think I can help you, at least with the documentary part. As for the media articles, that's another matter. It would be quite a challenging job. We'd have to scour the archives of a dozen

newspapers and sift through loads of microfilms from the past few years. But I know a journalist from Nice Matin. I could ask him how to do it most efficiently. He wouldn't suspect a thing. I'm conducting several local research projects and I've already consulted him several times."

Laura was pleased with his reaction. In fact, she was almost excited at the prospect of working with Rudi. He must have noticed something because he asked, "Well, why are you smiling now? What did I say that was funny?"

"Nothing funny, Rudi. I'm just grateful that you're willing to help me. Shall we take a look at the Giraud property from below?"

The drive down the steep, winding road was quite impressive. Rudi didn't want to use the breaks too much. "If the brake pads on these old vehicles overheat, they don't work and we'd have to go down without brakes, which is impossible with such a heavy car," he explained.

Several times the old Peugeot skidded to the edge of the gravel in the bends, but Rudi knew his car and the road. They drove back to the village and then up to the Chemin Saint-Martin. Rudi parked the car in front of the last house and they walked a few hundred metres.

Outside the stone shed, there were indeed many footprints. The area had been completely trampled. Laura was surprised to see that the door was closed but not locked. The chair had been set upright against the wall by the only window. It was a small room, almost as high as it was wide. The rope had been removed.

"Not much to see here after four months," Rudi remarked.

Laura looked around. While the police report had only noted two distinct shoe prints, the floor was now filled with footprints going in every direction. "As for the shed, we only have the police report to go on. They seem to have been pretty thorough. The fingerprint dust is still visible on every surface. Since they found only two distinct footprints inside the shed, but many outside, it means that the floor had been swept just before Gastoun was found hanging."

"Didn't the police mention this in their report?" Rudi asked.

"No, strangely enough they didn't. But they did mention that the window was closed and that it couldn't be operated from outside," Laura replied, "which means that no one else could have been in the room at the time of his death."

They walked back to the car and drove down to the village. Rudi parked in the square. She handed him a small piece of paper. "This is my friend David's number. I'm staying there for now." She opened the door of the car and went around the boot. Standing in front of him, she asked, "What are you doing this afternoon?"

He looked at her curiously, then smiled. "My supervisor is getting impatient because I have been dragging my feet for almost four years now. Last week, he made specific demands, and wants to see me again on Monday. I guess I have to work a bit."

Sensing her disappointment, though she tried to hide it, he took both her hands and added, "But I only work until 8 pm.

After that I'm free. Shall we meet at the café?" She smiled. He squeezed her hands lightly and left.

When Laura arrived at the bistro at eight that evening, the terrace was packed. Small groups of people spilled out into the street, some sitting around the washhouse, others on a wall across the street. She greeted those she already knew, but noticed that a few people turned to her with unfriendly, icy stares. Most of them were people she hadn't even spoken to. She assumed that Simone's deputy, Leslie, was responsible for this. She'd probably have to speak to him again.

She decided to look inside the pub to see if Rudi had arrived. The noise was deafening, as usual. Rudi was at the bar talking to one of the locals. She had to squeeze through the crowd and at one point she distinctly felt someone grab her breasts. When she turned, she saw two of the Dalmasso brothers. The family ran a construction business in the area. The older brother, a man in his late twenties with a heavy build and a bulldog face, turned to his younger sibling and shouted, "Self-service is free!”

"You're wrong," Laura shouted, as there was no other way to be heard over the ambient noise. "I will kick you if you ever touch my breasts again, you dirty little jerk."

Several men standing around them turned and looked at her, then at him. His expression changed. He wasn't grinning anymore. His father also looked at him sternly, made a sign with his head and they both left.

Rudi had seen what had happened. He pushed his way through the crowd to greet her. "Let's go outside," he shouted in her ear.

She followed him into the street. They crossed the road towards the village. "Did Marc Dalmasso bother you?" Rudi asked.

"He grabbed my breasts as I walked by," she replied.

Rudi seemed surprised. "He's a known bully, but I've never heard of anything like this before. The Dalmasso are the mayor's strongest supporters. This kind of behaviour is not good for public relations. I think his father will give him a piece of his mind."

Laura shrugged. "I saw this coming. It's a result of Simone's visit. Leslie is going all out. I could feel the tension in the air when I got here. But I'm not worried, it'll pass."

Rudi looked at her with concern, then changed the subject. "Tomorrow I'll be quite busy, but in the afternoon I'll try to find out about this Italian promoter. Let's meet at the café on Friday morning. I'll tell you what I've got."

As if in common agreement they continued walking, entering the village below the clock tower. For a moment none of them spoke, both seemed lost in their thoughts. When they had crossed the village and arrived at the southern exit, the sun had just set, and it was getting dark. They could still see enough to walk along the little stony path that led from the village through the olive groves down to the old railway.

When they passed a wide rocky plateau, Laura asked Rudi if they could sit there for a moment. The rock sloped gently down to the road and offered a magnificent view of the surrounding area. With its washed-out grooves, its surface still warm from the sun, the rock looked and felt like the back of a giant animal,

and Laura imagined she was sitting on a huge elephant. The first stars appeared in the darkening sky, and the scents of Provence wafted through the air. She stretched out and closed her eyes.

When she opened it, she saw Rudi looking at her with tender eyes. With her hand closest to him, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him towards her. It was spontaneous, without thinking, as if they'd been together for months. She wanted to feel his lips on hers, to smell his breath, his pheromones, to feel his body against hers. As they lay side by side, their caresses became more and more passionate.

That night they made love under the stars. They were both lost in space. Laura felt happy and intoxicated. Afterwards, neither of them bothered to get dressed. For a long time they lay naked under the sky. They talked about their desires and passions, their dreams, their fears and what made them strong. And what they would do if they lived on another planet up there in the Milky Way. Suddenly a bright shooting star crossed the sky and seemed to be falling into the sea.

"Hurry, Rudi, make a wish, but don't tell me," Laura laughed. She wished that the evening would last forever.

They would probably have spent the night there on the warm rocks if another couple hadn't come down the path from the village. When they heard them laughing a long way off, Laura jumped up to get dressed. Rudi found it amusing how prudish she was, but he didn't say anything and got dressed too.

Later, when they were both standing there, holding each other, he suddenly looked at her and said, "I've never felt so... complete, so peaceful."

He sounded almost worried. Laura felt compelled to reassure him, and said, "But that's normal, Rudi." It sounded silly. They both laughed out loud. He gave her a big hug, and they walked back to the village.

Neither of them wanted to go back to the bistro. She knew Rudi was home alone, but she didn't want to squeeze all the joy out of this moment. She was afraid that this incipient happiness would evaporate again.

When she told Rudi she was going back to Vence, he nodded. They agreed to meet in the café on Friday morning. When she left, Rudi stood in the middle of the road, watching her drive away.

8

Laura woke up refreshed, full of energy, and deeply in love. She found David in the kitchen cooking a steak, in spite of the early hour. She was delighted to see him and kissed him on the cheek. Jokingly, he offered to share the meat.

"You know I'm a vegetarian," she laughed, "but I'll take something so we can eat together and share our stories. I have some amazing news for you!"

After fetching a pot of yoghurt from the fridge, she poured milk into a large glass. By the time she took her breakfast to the terrace, David had already started his steak.

"You won't believe this, David. I'm a private investigator now!" She repeated the entire story of the past days, from Roussil's party to the visit to the shed, but didn’t mention her evening with Rudi, to avoid two revelations on totally different levels.

David didn't interrupt her. Twice she had to remind him that his steak was getting cold as he watched her in stunned silence. After she had finished and mentally prepared for objections, his immediate reaction was unexpected.

" Let's leave Simone aside for a moment, I'm going to talk to Leslie and calm him down a bit. But Laura, I am deeply sorry, and I sincerely apologise. I should have been more careful and reserved around Solange. I assumed she was making casual conversation, asking questions with no genuine interest. Your call was unexpected, and she didn't know you. I didn't suspect that Solange's questions about you were targeted. If her aim

was to get actual information from me, she's exceptionally good at it."

"You really shouldn't worry about that, David. Solange told me she had a hard time getting any useful information out of you. What she learnt from the artistic director at Balmain was far more valuable to her. But she knew him well and told him she wanted to hire me. So it was natural for him to give her the information."

David wasn't convinced. "If I hadn't told her your name and about your work in Paris, you wouldn't be in this situation. I can only hope that Solange is right and that it's suicide. I don't want you to end up chasing a murderer!"

"Neither would I, David," Laura replied. "But the police report clearly states that the only recent footprints leading to and inside the shed were Gastoun's and the witness's shoes. That's clear evidence of suicide. I wonder how Eisabello can still doubt it."

David pondered. "Maybe she visited the shed and, like you, noticed that someone had swept the floor recently, which is strange indeed. I wonder why the police didn't pay more attention to that."

Laura had already thought about it. "Maybe because they didn't see any recent footsteps outside the door," she said. "It's also rather unlikely that a murderer would hang his victim. Rudi thinks if it was a murder, there'd have to be at least two attackers, maybe even three. It's an unlikely and risky way to kill someone. There are many easier methods."

"If a killer wants to cover his tracks, it's best to make it look like an accident or a suicide," David replied. "But how did they get into the shed? Is there a window?"

"There is a window," she replied, "but it was closed the night Gastoun died and it can only be opened from the inside."

David stood up. "Let's go back. I want to see the place for myself."

With David's bike, they were back at the stone shed in less than twenty minutes. They could even take the donkey track up to the bottom of the field where they left the bike. When they arrived at the shed, David had a quick look at the area outside the door. He then went around the corner to look at the small window from the outside. The ground below the window was rocky, with a few patches of scrub, and seemed undisturbed. David pushed against the window, but it was locked from the inside.

"No one could have used that window to get into the shed," Laura said.

David disagreed. " With a big screwdriver, I'd open a window like that in ten seconds. I have done it many times. We learnt it on the streets of London's East End when I was young. If you wrap your screwdriver in a piece of rag, you can even open it without leaving a mark. Theoretically, they could have got into the shed without using the front door. When they'd finished, they cleaned the floor, made footprints with Gastoun's shoes and then simply slammed the window shut. As the ground here is rocky, it would have been easy to avoid leaving any footprints outside. Did the police report mention this window?"

Laura nodded in agreement. "They mentioned it in the description of the crime scene. You can also see the bottom of the window in a photograph. But obviously they didn't think it was important."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Laura remembered something. "Eisabello had added a few notes to the file. She had spent some time in the public library in Nice, reading about criminal investigations. I remember her long note about 'biased conclusions'. It seems to be a well-known danger in any investigation, especially when there is a lack of circumstantial evidence. In short, Eisabello believes the police found little evidence of foul play and more evidence of suicide. For this reason, they were biased in favour of the latter. According to her, the police's bias affected the investigation. They didn't even see any evidence outside their preconceived conclusion, let alone collect, and consider it."

David leaned against the wall and looked out over the field. He seemed worried. Laura felt the need to reassure him.

"David, it's certainly possible that Gastoun was murdered, at least in theory. But that doesn't mean it happened. It may be possible to get into the shed through the side window, but that doesn't prove that someone did it. Sure, it's odd that someone swept the floor and left the rest of the shed dirty. But that doesn't mean it was done to remove footprints from the floor. We are also biased. Because we want to be sure it wasn't a crime, we only look for evidence that could prove it was a crime. We have to be aware of this bias and not overestimate theoretical possibilities. I will keep that in mind. But now let's go back to the village and have something to drink. I'm thirsty."

It was midweek and the terrace of the Café Rossi was empty. Fred was sitting at one of the small round tables near the entrance to the bar. The table had disappeared beneath the local newspaper he was studying. When he heard the heavy motorcycle, he looked up and greeted them.

"I was hoping to see you, Laura. I have the keys to Martine's old house. The grandmother has agreed to rent it, but she has no money for repairs. I suggested you tell her how much it will cost and deduct the cost of the repairs from the rent. Would you like to see the house?"

David looked surprised. Laura told him she would have to move out of his place sometime, and this was an opportunity. "Come and see the house and give me your opinion."

It was in the heart of the village, at the corner of two alleys. One was a dead end, the other led to the old castle which housed the town hall. The three trapezoidal rooms, one on top of the other, were spacious, and got bigger at each level because the walls were thicker at the bottom. From the terrace at the top you could see the roofs of the village, the hills, the coast and beyond, the Mediterranean Sea.

"The house is spacious, and the view is stunning!" Laura exclaimed, "I'll take it! Whatever work needs to be done." She hadn't seen anything shocking as they climbed the narrow, winding staircase from the ground floor, so it couldn't be too expensive, she guessed.

But even Fred was more realistic. "Let me get Patrick's opinion first. He is an experienced renovator and can tell you what needs to be done. And how quickly he can do it." As they

climbed down, he added, "You'll also need some basic furniture."

Seeing her disappointed face, he joked, "You won't be able to sleep here tonight, you know?"

David laughed. "Looks like you're getting to know her."

Laura put her hands on Fred's shoulders and kissed him on the forehead. "Fred, right now you're my hero."

They invited Fred for a quick drink. He promised to talk to Patrick later that evening.

Back at David's, Laura went for a swim. She needed to clear her head and calm down. After putting on her new swimsuit, she jumped into the pool. As always when she swam, she lost all sense of time. When she finally got out, Birch was sitting on their terrace talking to David.

"Hi, Birch," she said when she approached the table. He turned around and stood up. They exchanged a French air-kiss.

"Hi, Laura. Every time I see you, you impress me again, and I don't even talk about your silhouette. You've been swimming since I got home and that was over an hour ago!"

He showed little concern about the initial tension between them. Laura was glad to see him because she wanted to discuss her use of the car for a few more weeks, even if she stayed in Tourrettes sur Loup. Once the investigation was over, she wouldn't need it anymore. But she decided not to mention the investigation.

"I'm going to prepare something to eat. Would you like to join us for lunch, Birch?"

He smiled, "With pleasure. I'll get a bottle of wine." As he sat down, she went into the house.

She put on light clothes and prepared a simple meal, sirloin for the men, a large bowl of salad for her and a selection of cheeses for everyone. They had bought bread in Tourrettes. The rye bread from Leschoni, the baker behind the church, was famous. Some of his clients came from far away.

Birch had brought a bottle of excellent wine from his cellar, and the atmosphere was relaxed. At one point Laura mentioned she had found a house in Tourrettes and might be moving there in a week or so.

"Birch, you kindly let me use the little red car this week. I wanted to ask you if I could use it for a few more weeks, even if I live in Tourrettes sur Loup. I have agreed to help a friend gather information and I need to get around. A car would make things easier for me."

Burch laughed. "You mean that old clunker? You can have it." Then he gave her an hesitant look. She thought he might change his mind, but he had another idea.

"My gift to you if you accompany me to the art auction in Monaco on Friday night." He smiled sheepishly. "Last night I had a quarrel with my girlfriend, who was supposed to come with me, and I don't want to go alone. Since you seem to appreciate art and know a thing or two about it, I can shine with you by my side."

Laura thought for a moment. He's a rich macho, but not a rapist. Well, the line between the two is blurry, but they'd be in a public place. It might also be an interesting opportunity to meet the rich and famous of the French Riviera.

"OK, you have a deal," she finally replied. But there was one problem, she had nothing to wear for such an occasion. She'd ask Eisabello, there must be second-hand designer shops in Nice.

David beamed. She had restored peace. For the time being.

After lunch, while Birch and David discussed other matters, Laura sat in her favourite spot under the pines and wrote down her thoughts. It's a routine she started during her retreat in London. It helped her to process events and sometimes led to the writing of poetry. At a quarter to three, she took her car, and drove to Tourrettes.

Eisabello was waiting for her outside the church, carrying a box of cake. As they drove to La Colle, Eisabello told Laura more about the cousin and her husband, but otherwise they didn't talk about the investigation.

The village was spread out, and the cousin lived in a bungalow in a rather modest residential area at the bottom of a valley. They parked the car in front of the house, behind a battered van. The front garden was littered with discarded plumbing equipment, garden tools, a partially dismantled car, and a pile of wood, probably salvaged from building sites. The clutter even partially blocked the entrance to the house.

Eisabello rang the doorbell, but no one answered. After the third ring, they heard a commotion inside and then someone

shuffled to the door. The man who opened it was still tucking his shirt into his trousers. His hair was dishevelled and his clothes were crumpled and stained. He looked at them with red eyes.

"Afternoon, Laurent. I hope we're not disturbing you," Eisabello said in a cheerful tone. "I've been meaning to come and see you for a while. Since I had some time on my hands and this excellent cake, I said to my friend Laura..." she gestured towards her, "...I said 'let's go and visit Laurent and Camille, they are nice people, always happy to welcome their cousin'. So here we are!"

The man looked at Laura, then at the box, then back at Eisabello. Maybe it was Eisabello's pleasant voice, or maybe his brain wasn't fully functional yet, but without a word he stepped aside to let them in. The inside of the house mirrored the chaos of the front yard. The air felt stuffy and stale. It was the atmosphere of cramped apartments that are rarely aired.

Eisabello went into the less cluttered kitchen and put her box on the table. "Camille's not here?" she asked.

"She's next door," he grumbled.

"Could you get her, Laurent? Please tell her I'm just popping in for a quick coffee and to share this cake. I'll heat the water in the meantime."

Amazingly, he didn't protest and just shuffled to the door. Less than five minutes later, he was back with his wife. Eisabello introduced Laura. As the kettle whistled, Camille went to the cupboard and fetched four cups and spoons, a packet of sugar,

and a bottle of instant coffee. She handed Eisabello a knife and asked her to cut the cake.

What followed showed Eisabello's rhetorical skills. They started with small talk until Eisabello slowly introduced questions about their children. The conversation then flowed naturally into family matters until Eisabello mentioned Gastoun's death. From that point on, the warmth in her voice, which had already made Laura wonder what she was trying to achieve, disappeared, and her voice became harsher.

"We didn't see you at the funeral," Eisabello said. "It made some people wonder."

"'Wonder what?" asked Laurent.

"Well...," Eisabello knew a pause could focus attention. "Your performance in front of our house at the end of January, the day after the wedding, was the talk of the village for a week. At the funeral everyone still remembered it. Especially the threat. That you were going to kill Gastoun."

"What?" Laurent stood up. He was fully awake and furious now. "So now you're saying I killed your brother?"

"I'm not saying anything, Laurent. I'm just telling you that when you didn't come to the funeral, people in Tourrettes wondered why."

Laurent stepped closer to Eisabello. "I never liked Gastoun. And I'm telling you, he was a thief. But I'm no murderer. You already called the cops on us. Stop this shit, OK? He killed himself, the idiot."

Eisabello seemed to know him well. She wasn't intimidated. "Gastoun was no thief," she replied calmly. "If you're referring to the inheritance again, you're accusing him of something that happened before he was born. And we never sent the police after you. Your behaviour in Tourrettes made them suspicious. You attracted them yourself."

Camille busied herself at the sink, trying to stay out of the argument. Her husband took a step towards Eisabello. "The cops say I'm fine. There are witnesses. But listen. If he hadn't killed himself, I would have, eventually. Now get out of here and never show your face again. Ever."

Eisabello stood up. "I want you to know that the police are reopening the case. We now have evidence that it was murder. So be prepared to be questioned again, Laurent." She nodded at Camille and said, "I'm sorry for you, cousin, but you married him. Just know that it's never too late to make things right." Then she gave Laura a barely perceptible wink and walked to the door.

Once they were in the car and had rounded the corner, Eisabello took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. "'Gosh, that wasn't easy, but I feel better. I am still suspicious of that brute. I think he's capable of murder, especially when he's been drinking. And he knows enough thugs who would help him. I made up the story about the police reopening the case. But if he is guilty, he won't be able to sleep any more. That's all we can do with him for now."

"But he's right, I read in the report that he has an airtight alibi, confirmed by several people," Laura objected, looking at her.

Eisabello grimaced. "Pfff... two of his drinking buddies pretended they were playing cards at one of their houses and their wives confirmed it. I wouldn't call that airtight. These drunks will testify to anything if you buy them a beer. They might even have done it together. And their wives, like Camille, are afraid of a beating if they open their mouths. They are cowards, all of them. But we know what drunken cowards can do. Let's see how we get along. Maybe we can think of something better to make him lose his footing. For now, let's concentrate on the Italian developer."

During the trip back to the village, Laura told Eisabello about the police file and what they saw during the two shed visits.

"But let's not get ahead of ourselves," she concluded. "I've read your detailed note about jumping to conclusions. This is also a warning for us. None of these facts prove your brother was murdered."

"You're right, Laura," she replied. But her tone suggested a lack of conviction behind her words.

9

At the same time, south-west of Naples…

The temperature outside was close to 40 degrees and Naples was stifling. But here in Posilippo, south-west of Naples, the sea breeze cooled the air and the huge trees in the park surrounding the villa lowered the temperature by several degrees. Eight luxury cars were parked outside the villa. The drivers and bodyguards stood nearby, most of them smoking.

Inside the villa, eight men and one woman had been gathered for over an hour. Not only was it rare for the leaders of the various European countries to meet in person, but most of the men had been standing all the time! Only one was sitting in a large comfortable chair, with a woman standing behind him. The other seven men, plus the three bodyguards behind the door, had been standing since the start of the meeting. Although the room was air-conditioned, some of them were beginning to feel that it was getting long.

The voice of the man in the chair was suave, almost gentle, but his eyes were hard. "Maybe you're getting old, Guiseppe. You’re getting soft and lazy. It's bad for your health, believe me. There was a time when I could trust you to get things done."

"With all due respect, Don Cesare, as Mario said, it's not our fault, it's EC law. Until they've finished their investigation we can't continue, all our sites are sealed off."

The woman behind Don Cesare laughed out loud. "So you're a law-abiding German citizen now, Guiseppe?" she asked.

"Donna Marando, I can deal with German customs and civil servants, I can deal with their members of parliament, even with most of the ministers in the Schmidt cabinet. But this is EC business. We need a better team in Brussels. It's in Brussels that we have to solve this problem, not in Germany."

He turned to the man in the chair. "If you don't mind my saying so, Don Cesare..."

"Fanculo!" exclaimed the woman. "Not only do we mind what you say, we mind what you do, Guiseppe, or rather that you do nothing but tan your fat ass! You should be raising hell in the country, strikes, fights, beatings, bombs... instead of coming here with boring explanations about EC procedures and this stupid investigation." Some of the standing men looked at each other and then down at their feet.

After a minute of silence, the man in the chair spoke again with his soft voice. "You have two weeks to reopen all the sites in Germany. And I want you to come here every week let me know how you're getting on. Same for Mario, Pietro, Ermano and Valentino. Capito?" The men nodded in agreement.

"And now Benito, come and give me some good news. How are our operations in France?"

10

Laura got up early the next morning. She had barely slept the night, eager to see Rudi. As she parked the car in the village square and walked up to the Café Rossi, Rudi came out of the door with a large cup of coffee. As soon as he saw her, he turned around and went back inside to get a second one.

They sat down at a table on the side terrace near the old village washhouse. Laura told Rudi about David's observations at the shed and that she'd seen Martine's old house, which might need some work before she could move in. "Fred said he'd ask Patrick," she added.

Rudi already knew. "Last night Fred dragged Patrick from the Café to the house," he laughed. "Patrick was tired from a hard day's work, but Fred insisted until he agreed. When they came back, Fred looked pleased. Apparently, there was quite a lot of work to be done. Nevertheless, Fred could persuade Patrick to start next Monday, even though he had urgent projects waiting for him."

Such gestures of friendship touched Laura deeply. She had known Fred for less than a week and hadn't even met Patrick. "I have to find a way to thank Fred. He has helped me a lot since I arrived," she said.

Rudi smiled. "Fred is very outgoing, but with his caustic manners he doesn't have many real friends. He seems to see you as a potential candidate. Now let's talk about your investigation. I have some information for you on Meridione Asset Management SpA."

Rudi sipped his coffee and continued. "I'm going to use an acronym to make it easier to present what I've found, and call the company as MAM. If you're wondering about the acronym SpA, it's the Italian equivalent of an anonymous company. They do not make public calls for money and the shareholders are anonymous. However, they have to publish their annual accounts, but MAM doesn't. That's not unusual, especially in Italy, where they just pay a small fine every year. So probably we won't have any accounts, but I'm still working on it. Maybe I can get the information otherwise. But it wouldn't be important, anyway."

He paused to let her ask what he meant exactly. "Why is that?" Laura complied.

Rudi smiled. "From what I could gather, MAM is just the outer layer of a rather complex structure of Russian dolls. They have nested several companies inside each other. The last visible part is based on the Bahamas. MAM only signs the big contracts and delegates the work to its subsidiaries. You can be sure that they don't make any profit and just break even. Money flows in and out and the profits hide in the tax heavens. Again, this isn't unusual. It's an arrangement used by many big companies to avoid tax. And it also avoids scrutiny of other aspects, such as 'who controls the operations', 'who is responsible', or 'who pockets the money'."

Rudi continued. "The name Meridione Asset Management SpA suggests that they're not property developers but investors. That is also a cover. As far as I have been able to find out, they only deal with large property developments throughout Europe. And if you look at the entire structure, their

role is not limited to financing projects. Their subsidiary CDS SpA, which stands for Costruzioni del Sud SpA, manages all the projects they finance, including those outside Italy. CDS builds nothing either. They are a sort of project management company. They break down projects into specific tasks that are subcontracted to local construction companies." Rudi looked at her to see if she was following.

She smiled at him. "I'm listening, don't worry. It just amazes me how the construction industry is organised. There are a lot of walls all along the line."

Rudi nodded. "So far, I have only been able to look at CDS's Italian projects, which they always subcontract to the same three large Italian construction companies. But this is where it gets interesting. One of these companies has recently gone bankrupt. They built the Torre dei Lombardi. You may have heard of the terrible accident that happened two years ago. The Torre dei Lombardi would have been the tallest building in Italy, 120 metres, or thirty-two floors. It collapsed during construction in 1976, killing 115 workers, and seriously injuring twice as many. The investigation ordered by the judge found that all the materials used, especially the concrete, were of poor quality. And the broken sections of the girders had impurities found only in low-grade iron. In addition, the original plans approved by the authorities had been simplified without authorisation. Most of the workers were illegal immigrants without a valid work permit, and very basic safety rules had not been observed on site."

"The full scope! Unbelievable! Was there any law they hadn't broken?" asked Laura

"It's not finished yet," Rudi continued, "I also contacted Lucas, the Nice Matin journalist. I asked him how to search the archives of the major French and Italian newspapers for specific information. He wanted to know what I was looking for, and when I mentioned MAM, he asked if it was for their 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project. He knows that I live in the village. Then he told me it wasn't their only project on the French Riviera. They have at least four others along the coast between Italy and Saint Tropez. All are in similar locations, with spectacular views. Two are even in protected nature reserves, which is for the least surprising."

"But more interesting for us, Lucas recently read in several major Italian newspapers that 'Torre dei Lombardi' is not MAM's only problem in Italy. The investigating judge found out that the two other subcontractors are entirely controlled by the Calabrian Mafia. Lucas had written an article about MAM for Nice Matin. His editor-in-chief changed the text from critical information to what Lucas called 'virtual advertising for MAM'. Lucas refused to sign the article, and it was never published. He'll give me the draft of his own article if we need it."

Laura was impressed. "You got all that information in a single afternoon?"

Rudi grinned. "Training. It's part of what we're taught in Social Sciences, how to find the information we need. But they also teach us to keep a critical mind. The facts I told you seem impressive at first glance. You hear Mafia, tax fraud, malversation, Russian dolls... and you might be tempted to jump to conclusions. For sure, they are bad guys. But that

doesn't mean they killed Gastoun, or even that Gastoun was killed."

Rudi was seriously downplaying the value of his work. Laura was a little annoyed. "Let me get this straight, Rudi. We know Gastoun refused to sell his land to a company that, unbeknownst to him, was a front for a major branch of the Italian Mafia. His refusal may or may not have led to the murder. The floor in the shed had recently been swept clean, which may, or may not have been done to remove footprints. Although the steps outside the door showed no suspicious marks, the shed had a window that a killer could easily open from the outside, which may or may not have been used for this purpose. Did I get that right?"

Rudi smiled. "To the point. Beautifully summed up. Frustrating, eh? Based on these assumptions, we can only form two hypotheses: Gastoun was probably murdered, possibly by MAM assassins. With no evidence to support our hypotheses, the police will tell us that it's all speculation, it won't convince them to reopen the case."

Alfred walked past them with a broom. "There you are. David just called for you, Laura. He wants you to call him back. He says it's urgent."

David, and it's urgent? Has he lost something, or worse... was it Simone? Laura went into the Café and asked for the phone.

"Laura, that's quick," David said as he replied. "I didn't want to explain to Alfred. Eisabello rang ten minutes ago. She said she needed to speak to you urgently. She's waiting for your call."

Relieved that it wasn't about Simone, Laura told David that she was in Tourrettes sur Loup and would see Eisabello immediately. She explained her intentions to Rudi and they agreed to meet afterwards.

Eisabello opened the door almost immediately. This time she greeted Laura in the French manner. They were the same height. "Come up, please."

Once they were seated at the table in front of the window in Eisabello's living room, she said, "I have something important to show you." She paused.

Once she was sure she had Laura's full attention, she continued. "Before I do that, I must explain something that is essential for your understanding. Gastoun was very old-fashioned. One of his habits was to wear his best suit when he went into town. On the day he died, we went shopping in Vence in the morning. When we got back at lunchtime, he had changed back into his usual outfit. Today I sorted all his clothes to give the better ones to charity. I didn't want to leave any personal items in his pockets, so I went through them all. This is what I found in the costume he was wearing the day he died.

Eisabello handed Laura a folded piece of paper. Laura unfolded it to read it. It was an A5 sheet of paper with a single typed sentence in the middle of the page:

At midnight, in the old stone shed on your land
above the Chemin Saint-Martin.

Laura was speechless. She couldn't even think straight for a moment. Someone had lured Gastoun to the shed. This piece of paper was proof that he had been murdered. After

everything Rudi had just told her, the effect of this note was a bombshell. Gastoun had been a victim of the Mafia!

She summarised for Eisabello what Rudi had found out about Meridione Asset Management SpA and concluded that they had to give the note to the police. "There could be fingerprints on it, including yours and mine now".

Eisabello shook her head. "Do you really think these people were careless enough to touch the paper without gloves? And what do you think the police will do? What does an anonymous, typewritten sentence on an ordinary piece of paper prove? A paper found four months after the investigation was closed! And then conveniently found by me, the bore, the grumbler, who kept complaining that the police weren't doing their job properly!"

Eisabello seemed to be angry now. "Do you know what they will tell me? That I wrote it myself to convince them to reopen the case! But I didn't write it, Laura. Why would I do that? For you? You had already agreed to help me with the investigation. I found it and I had to show it to you. I have always been convinced of this, but now we have irrefutable proof: Gastoun was murdered. What you mentioned yesterday, the swept floor, the window, and now the Mafia connection of this company... it all fits."

Laura felt dizzy. This investigation was suddenly turning into a nightmare. Did Eisabello really think they could track down a killer sent by the Mafia?

The incident in Saint Paul suddenly came to her mind.

"Eisabello, do you remember when we called you from Saint Paul on Tuesday to tell you that I had accepted? We phoned from the post office. As we crossed the road and I looked back for cars, I saw that two men were following us and watching us. During lunch, the same two men sat at a table next to ours."

"Laura, don't get paranoid. Tuesday you hadn't even started investigating, and Solange had always been convinced it was a suicide. Why should anyone have followed you or Solange? Actually, I didn't call her this morning, but I should tell her now. It will be a big surprise for her. As for the two men in Saint Paul, Laura, it was pure coincidence, or they were interested in something else. You are a beautiful woman, you know?"

The compliment seemed out of place, and Laura didn't react. Something else was bothering her. She didn't want Solange to know about the paper. It was irrational, a gut feeling she couldn't explain. Especially as Solange had always been kind, even generous. No, she couldn't be involved in her uncle's murder, helping the Mafia. The idea was absurd.

Eisabello sensed her concern. "Laura, I'm neither stupid nor naïve. I wouldn't dream of fighting the Mafia. All I want is to convince the police to reopen the case. At least admit that it was a murder. And if possible, to bring the murderer and those who ordered the murder to justice. We can't do it ourselves. I know the Mafia is a matter for Interpol. But at the moment, we have nothing to convince even the local police to reopen the case. Tell me, what are we supposed to do? Give up? Now that we have proof that it was murder? We know we are on the right track. The only real new information for me is the confirmation

of the mafia connection. But let's be extra vigilant, even if no one knows we're investigating."

She was right. They couldn't just turn their backs and carry on as if nothing had happened. Laura wouldn't be able to live with that on her conscience. An innocent man had been murdered and no one seemed to care except the two of them. Well, there was David and Rudi, but they seemed more interested in her wellbeing than in justice for Gastoun. At the very least, she must help Eisabello find enough evidence for the police to take over.

"You are right, Eisabello. We must be very careful. And that is why this paper must remain a secret. You don't even have to tell Solange. Telling her won't help the investigation."

Eisabello looked confused. "Why do you say that, Laura? Solange is my daughter and Gastoun was her uncle. She has a right to know."

It was difficult for Laura to explain her hesitation because it wasn't quite clear in her mind. She made one last attempt. "I have read that in critical situations covert agents apply the 'need to know' rule. Even if they trust someone, they don't reveal critical information. Unless it helps in some way."

"Laura, I understand what you are saying. But Solange really does need to know. It's for her own safety and ours. She needs to be careful from now on to protect us. If I just told Solange to be careful, she would laugh at me. She has to see the proof that it was murder. I still think the two men in Saint Paul were only interested in your appearance, but it won't hurt to watch our backs in future, all three of us."

Laura was running out of arguments, and her suspicion of Solange seemed unreasonable, so she thought it better to change the subject. "Can I have a photocopy of that letter, please?"

Eisabello had already prepared one. "The bookshop next to the bakery has a photocopier. They let me use it sometimes."

"Thank you, Eisabello. I have a completely different question for you. Can you recommend a second-hand designer clothes shop in the area? I have an invitation to a posh evening in Monaco on Friday night, but I have nothing to wear."

Eisabello thought for a moment. "I've heard there's such a place in Cannes, but I couldn't tell you the name or where it is. But listen, let me show you some clothes I have. You could probably wear them if you find one you like, because we are both about the same size. I haven't worn them since I was your age, and I certainly won't need them in the future."

Half an hour later, Laura had a simple but beautiful outfit with matching shoes. It was a very daring, long, backless, form-fitting dress in a solid Yves Klein blue with beautiful embroidered motifs in the same colour.

Eisabello insisted that of the three dresses Laura liked, this was certainly the one that attracted the most attention. "This one fits you perfectly, and it's a real eye-catcher. I've always felt that since I don't have the money for a Dior or Saint Laurent dress, I have to impress in other ways. Besides, the colour of this dress is a nod to the Ecole de Nice."

"Thank you, Eisabello. I'll only need it for one night. I'll return it on Monday."

"Don't bring it back, Laura, keep it. I'm sure I won't need it again and neither will Solange. She's smaller than me. I'm glad you're wearing it now."

They went back into the living room and sat down at the table. Eisabello brought two glasses of iced tea. "Let's think about what to do now," she said.

"Well, Gastoun must have got the paper somewhere," Laura said. "It was in the costume he was wearing that day, and it says 'at midnight', which means the same day. So we know he got the paper that morning, and when he read it he was already wearing his costume. There's another thing we can assume: the killer was sure of the timing, that he would read the paper before midnight that same day. I think it was in the letterbox."

Eisabello shook her head. "We don't have a letterbox. During the restoration of the facade, which took several months, we had a post box at the post office. Since I got into the habit of taking the mail there every morning, we've kept it ever since."

There was only one other possibility, Laura thought. "Did he leave the house that morning?"

Eisabello shook her head. "Not that I noticed. The only time I can't vouch for it was when I visited Mrs Graziani, an old lady who lives alone next to the castle. When we go shopping in Vence, she always gives me a long list of special foods that she can't get here in the village. I was gone for half an hour. Gastoun was here when I left and when I returned. If he left the house, it was in a hurry and only for a short time.

Laura needed to find out if he had left and where he had gone, but she had an idea. "This is something to start with. Do you remember what time you went to see the old lady?"

As she left Eisabello, she kissed her cheeks. Eisabello took a step back, looking at Laura while she touched her right arm. "I admit that this is potentially dangerous. Even though I don't know how to do this alone, I can't ask you to take any risks. It can only be your own choice. If you want to stop now or later, I'd be lost, but I'd understand."

Laura didn't know what to say, so she cracked a smile, then turned, and walked away. She was more scared than she'd ever been in her life. But what could she do except stay awake and try to be smarter than those who would eventually come after her? If they hadn't already.

She needed to talk to both David and Rudi, preferably in a joint discussion. If they were willing to continue helping her, they could brainstorm together. Laura put the dress, the shoes, and the folder with the photocopy in her car and rang David.

He answered on the third ring. "Ah, Laura. Was it important?"

"It was. David, can I bring Rudi? I need to talk to both of you together." He agreed, so she went to the little pink house on the edge of the village where Rudi lived.

There was no bell and the door to the small walled front garden was open. Laura climbed the steps and knocked on the door. Naomi opened with a big smile. She was barefoot, wearing a linen overall with frayed hems and no shirt underneath.

"Laura! How are you? Is this a social call or are you looking for Rudi?"

Noami was the first and only Frenchwoman Laura had met who didn't spontaneously greet you with a kiss on the cheek, perhaps because she was rather small. She only smiled at her, but didn't invite her in.

"To be honest, Naomi, I'm looking for Rudi, he’s helping me gather some information."

Naomi looked at her with her big, dark brown eyes. "I know, Rudi told me. He is supposed to be here at eleven. Would you like to come in and wait for him?"

It was 10:30. Laura wasn't in the mood for idle chatter and she had to see Fred. "That's very kind of you, Naomi. But I have to see someone. Please ask Rudi to come to the Café Rossi as soon as he can, it's important." She kissed Naomi on the cheek and left. Strangely, she was almost grateful to her.

Fred was sitting at a table in the Café Rossi, reading Nice Matin. Laura ordered two coffees and sat down at his table.

"Tiercé?" she asked.

"Yes, but today's races are not interesting. As for your house, I showed Patrick..." Fred started.

"Rudi told me," she cut him off. "You're an angel, Fred. I don't know how to thank you."

Fred laughed. "A fallen angel, if you insist on using religious imagery. I promised Patrick he'd get two hundred francs on Monday to buy the supplies he needs to get started. I hope

that's OK. He thinks the plumbing, electricity, and painting will take a week or two and cost about one thousand two hundred francs in total. New francs, unfortunately. I have already told Martine's grandmother. She suggested you stay for six months rent-free and then pay 200 francs a month."

"Fred, I'm going to start a petition to have you pardoned and allowed back into heaven." Léon had put their coffee cups on the counter, and she got up to get them. "Would you like a croissant with your coffee?"

They talked about life in the village, and Fred told some funny stories about his childhood in the northern suburbs of Paris and his work there. A computer engineer by profession, he had been working in a data centre in Paris when he "got the call", as he put it. He and his girlfriend disappeared for a year to the Rishikesh ashram in India. It was the same ashram where the Beatles had meditated four years earlier. When his girlfriend joined the ranks of the guru's many lovers, Fred left. On a brief visit to Kathmandu, he met a girl from Tourrettes who brought him here. Fred got a job in a big accounting firm in Nice, equipped with the then brand-new IBM 5100. His girlfriend returned to Nepal the following year and Fred stayed on in Tourrettes.

"I still work part-time for that company in Nice. I train them on a brand-new piece of software and write small programmes to customise and adapt the software to their needs. By the way, they are expecting me for a meeting, so I better go."

After Fred left, Laura went out onto the terrace and was about to fetch the newspaper that Fred had left folded on a table when Rudi arrived.

"Naomi told me it was important. What's going on?" he asked.

Laura looked behind her, lowered her voice, and switched to English. "We have evidence of murder, Rudi. Have you got a couple of hours? I want to talk to you and David together."

Rudi looked doubtful. "Sure, this is important. I need to be in Nice this afternoon, so I follow you in my car."

David was in the kitchen chopping raw vegetables, a large bowl beside him, and an enormous piece of red meat on a plate by the stove. Laura put the blue dress and shoes in her room, picked up the folder with the photocopy, and returned to the kitchen.

David looked worried. "Rudi just told me you seem to have proof that it was murder?"

Laura tried to put on a reassuring smile, but she got the impression it was more like a stiff grimace. "Let's go outside and have a drink. I'll explain it to you both."

Once they were sitting on David's terrace, she asked Rudi to start by summarising his findings on Meridione Asset Management SpA for David. When he'd finished, she told them about her visit to Eisabello and showed them the photocopy of the note that Eisabello had found in Gastoun's pocket. David looked at the note for a moment and then handed it to Rudi.

He sat down in his chair, leaned forward slightly, folded his hands, and stared at the table in front of him. There was a moment of silence. Then David said, "I understand your position, Laura. I feel the same way. We cannot turn a blind eye

to the brutal murder of an innocent man. But we do not know what we are letting ourselves in for. If they are prepared to kill anyone who gets in their way, we could be next."

Rudi held the note up to his eyes. "It's an excellent photocopy," he said. "You can even see that the impression of the letter O is weaker, and the T seems to be slightly bent backwards."

David turned to him. "And you think that's important?"

"Could be," Rudi replied, "if we ever get our hands on the typewriter they used, it would be proof." Then he turned to Laura. "What are you going to do?"

Laura looked from one to the other. "I want to find enough evidence to convince the police to reopen the case. All we have... sorry, all I have is this piece of paper. We may think Eisabello is telling the truth, but the police won't. I see a chance to go further. The murderer had to be sure that Gastoun would read the paper that very day. Gastoun didn't have a letterbox, so there's only one other possibility: one of the two bistros."

Rudi agreed. "Gastoun certainly took advantage of Eisabello's absence to rush to one of them for his morning dose of 'white balloons'. They're used in both bistros to deliver messages to the locals. But let's not ignore the possibility that he could have got the paper from someone on the street."

David shook his head. "Not on the street. It's too risky. You don't know who's looking. The villagers are curious. And in Vence, if Eisabello had seen someone handing him a paper, she would have insisted on knowing what was going on. But if it

went through one of the bistros, would that mean the killer was a local? It could point to the cousin's husband."

"At the very least, it means the killer knew Gastoun's habits," Laura said. "The logical next step would be to find out in which bistro Gastoun got the note and who left it for him. But I can't go from bistro to bistro asking, 'Hey, did you give Gastoun a note the day he was found dead?' They'd wonder what I was up to. It would raise a lot of questions."

"I can find out," Rudi said, "I knew him well and I'm trained to ask questions without arousing suspicion."

Laura smiled at him. "Social scientists make skilled detectives."

Rudi laughed. "There aren't many jobs for sociology graduates. On the next freshers' information day, I'll tell them to join the police. They'll love it."

David grew impatient. "Shall we eat now?"

"Wait a minute, David," Laura said. "I want to get this out of the way first. I'm fully aware of the risks of this investigation, and I'm not ashamed to tell you I'm scared. But I cannot give up now. It's not just for Eisabello, it's for my conscience, my sense of morality, and justice. From our conversation and the upcoming investigation, I know that your help would be invaluable, I don't want to say vital, because I don't want to push you. You must make your own decision. If you refuse, there'll be no hard feelings. If you accept, we'll split the money I get from Eisabello. That's the least I can do."

David sat down again. "Laura, you're one of my closest friends. Whatever I can do to help, just let me know and I'll be there. Do you really think I'd let you go through this alone? And don't mention money. You've got to be kidding."

Rudi nodded. "I agree with David. I've got a few other things going on and won't be available full-time. But whatever I can do to help and support you, I'll do. And never mention money again. But there is one thing I would like to suggest to both of you. We have to be very careful. Let's agree on the principle of 'need to know' and not talk about this with anyone, and never anything more than what they need to know to help our investigation."

Laura must have had a big smile on her face because Rudi asked: "What's so funny about that, Laura? It's a principle we used when we were preparing our operations in Germany, when I was a left-wing activist. It's useful in a risky operation."

Laura became serious again. "Nothing funny, Rudi. I told Eisabello exactly the same thing this morning when she wanted to tell Solange about the paper. I can't explain why, but I don't trust Solange completely. Eisabello was shocked and actually she was right. Solange needs to know."

David was obviously hungry. "I'll prepare the steaks."

After lunch Rudi left for the university. Laura washed the dishes and sat down by one of the huge pine trees. She wanted to meditate to clear her mind, but she was overtired and soon fell asleep.

When she woke up, David was gone. Feeling fresh and determined to put all her energy into finishing this

investigation, she decided to assess the situation. What could she do to move it forward?

As she had always found that her ideas were more inspired when she was walking, she set off without a specific destination in mind.

She took a small road along the side of the mountain and ended up on a path that led into a narrow river valley, up the steep cliff. Soon she was walking on bare rock. There was a frighteningly narrow air passage along the top of the cliff, with no protection. She could see the river cascading along small rock pools about fifty metres below.

At one point the path ended abruptly. She sat down on a protruding rock and looked around. The sun was already behind the wall in front of her. Despite the beauty of the scene, she felt depressed. The time and this place translated how she felt about her investigation. It was the end of the day and the end of the trail, while she had the feeling that she reached a dead end in the investigation. If they didn't find out who had left the note for Gastoun, she didn't see how they could go on.

The only other tactic she could think of was to bluff, to provoke the killer into making a mistake. For example, by spreading the information that she knew who killed Gastoun, or at least that she knew more than she actually did. But that would be as foolish as jumping from here into one of those pools down below.

She got up and went home.

11

At the same time, somewhere else…

For the first time, he felt that this wasn't going to end well. He was at a loss.

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I suggest that you stop philosophising and come back down to earth. Take a step back and look at the big picture, including your own life. Forget about rules and principles and look at your own vital interests."

"My own vital interests? What do you mean by that?"

"I've explained it twice already. Legalise the whole thing, put it on the books. Then we can fight it in court."

"That's totally unacceptable."

"I don't see any alternative."

He didn't answer, but turned to look out the window. "Benito told me you were behind the deal."

"So that's it. And you believe him?"

He kept looking out the window, trying to buy some time. He'd hoped his remark would be a bombshell; he hadn't expected this calm reaction.

"Let's say you and I have a troubled past."

"I don't see any trouble for me, but you're right about yourself."

"We'll see about that later, one problem at a time. Whether you're responsible for this mess or not, you'll have to fix it. You insisted that you could."

"We are talking in circles. To repeat, and to put it simply, as long as it's an illegal operation and you don't put it on the books, you're not in a position to negotiate."

"On the contrary, I think I am. I made him a counter-proposal. But he laughed at me. Did he tell you that?"

"He told me you insulted him."

"At one point he became extremely arrogant."

"You've got to be kidding me. I don't think you realise how serious your situation is. He is losing patience. This has gone on long enough."

"What is that supposed to mean? Whose side are you on? It sounds like a threat."

"You must resolve this matter now or you'll face more drastic measures."

"Here we go, now the masks come off!"

"You really seem to be stuck. You have exactly one week to clear this up once and for all. And you know how. After that, one way or another, you're done."

Shocked by the tone and the words, he was still looking out the window when he heard the sound of the door closing.

12

That night Laura slept well and woke up to see the sun rising over the Mediterranean. A continuum of colours lit up the sky. From bright yellow to dark blue, the sea reflected the full palette of the sky. What a beautiful way to start the day!

She had a cup of coffee, then jumped into her car, eager to meet Rudi. After parking the car in the square, she walked up to Café Rossi when she saw him coming out of the bistro door. He had a large cup of Café Crème in each hand. Smiling at her, he made his way to their usual table near the old village washhouse. They sat down and after exchanging a few tender words, Laura told him about her afternoon.

Rudi seemed eager to share his findings with her. "What I've discovered confirms the authenticity of the note and will probably help us remove the cousin from our list once and for all. Gastoun had received the note from George in the Café Maurel bistro."

"You know that for sure?" she asked excitedly.

If her silly question annoyed Rudi, he didn't show it. "I spoke to Alain, George Maurel's son. A man Alain had never seen before gave him the note the evening before the fatal day. The stranger came into the bistro and asked if he could leave a message for Gastoun Giraud. He said it was important, and he needed to be sure that Gastoun would get it the next day. Alain told him that his father would certainly see Gastoun the next morning. The man just nodded and handed him a letter. Gastoun's name was handwritten on it, nothing else."

"He remembers the scene four months later?" Laura asked.

"In fact, Alain remembered the man very well. He had red hair, a thick Italian accent and was wearing an expensive-looking light cream suit and matching leather gloves in April. Alain thought it was a strange way to dress."

Laura suddenly had a flash. "Rudi, one of the two men who followed Solange and me last Tuesday in Saint Paul, also had red hair. The other was dark and had a beard. I had already noticed the two men near our table at the restaurant. Red-haired men are not very common in this area, I haven't seen any here apart from David."

Rudi looked concerned. "We must assume it was the same man. But they couldn't know you yet. Maybe they were watching Solange. But why? And how did they know that they could leave a note for Gastoun at the bistro, and that he won't pick it up that evening and go to the shed at the wrong time? And where is the handwritten envelope?"

"I'll have to ask Eisabello about the envelope," she said. "As for your other questions, he could have asked in the village how to reach Gastoun, and someone told him to leave a message at the bistro, that Gastoun goes there every morning."

Rudi was sceptical. "Wouldn't a villager have sent him to Gastoun's home?"

After Rudi had duly written all their questions in a small notebook, they continued to speculate for a while. Eventually they realised that they were only putting off the real question: what now? Even if Eisabello had the envelope, the only way to

move the investigation forward was to find the redhead. And then what?

Rudi was rather pessimistic. "If these guys realise that you're on to them, you're in trouble."

"I thought the same thing yesterday. This is probably the end of our part. I will inform Eisabello of your findings and ask her about the envelope. Then, if there's nothing more we can do, I'll write a report for Eisabello to give to the police and hope for the best. Alain's testimony somehow authenticates the note, which proves it was murder".

Laura looked at Rudi. He nodded, so she continued. "I'll do that tomorrow. Tonight I'll be in Monaco. I've been invited to a fancy art auction. Nothing to do with our investigation, but it's an opportunity to look behind the wall where the super-rich wallow. If there's any news, I'll let you know."

Laura stood up. Rudi took her hand and looked up at her. "Have you heard from Simone? Do you think she's still around? When I greeted Leslie in the bistro last night and asked him, he didn't answer. He just turned his head."

"People like Simone separate the wheat from the chaff. I don't think she's still here," she said, pulling him up. "Leslie took over," she added, gave him a tender kiss, smiled at him and left.

Laura crossed the square and knocked on Eisabello's door. Eisabello opened with a smile. "I was just about to call you and here you are! Please come up, Laura. Solange is here. She has important news and will be happy to see you."

When they reached Eisabello's living room, Solange came down the stairs from the second floor. "Hi Laura." Her expression was unusually cool. "I have to go. My mother will bring you up to date."

"Please stay a minute. I have important news too," Laura replied, looking straight at Solange. "We have identified the person who left the note for Gastoun in the bistro 'Café Maurel'."

Solange's eyes widened slightly. Eisabello was delighted. "You're fabulous, Laura, you really are. See, Solange, I told you!"

Solange frowned. Her expression was a strange mixture of disbelief and distraction. "You've identified the person who left the note in the bistro?"

"I don't have his name and address yet," she said, "but I have an excellent description. And you know what, Solange? He's one of the two guys who sat next to us in the Café de la Place and then followed us to the post office, the one with the red hair."

Eisabello was the first to react. She was sceptical. "How can you be so sure?" she asked. "You didn't see the man in the bistro."

Laura turned to her. "I have no proof, Eisabello, but the description of the man who left the note at the Café Maurel matches one of the men who followed us in Saint Paul. Incidentally, he delivered the note in an envelope. Did you see it?"

"Yes, I did," Eisabello replied. "Gastoun had cut it open and put it in his pocket with the sheet. I didn't show it to you the other day because it was an ordinary envelope, just marked 'Gastoun Giraud', nothing else. I left it in his bedroom. Do you want it?"

"Yes, please, I need it. His name is handwritten on it."

Eisabello nodded, "Yes, it is, but in block letters. One moment."

As Eisabello went up to Gastoun's apartment on the second floor, Solange called out, "Bye, Mamina."

She didn't seem to want to kiss Laura goodbye. "I have to go, Laura. Watch out for redheads," she grinned and turned to leave.

Laura thought it was an insensitive remark. "I don't find it funny, Solange. Don't you realise they lured your uncle into the shed and his death?"

Solange stopped and turned around to face Laura. "No, Laura, I don't," she replied. "Your speculations are pathetic. They don't help my mother, on the contrary."

"You saw the note..." Laura began.

Solange interrupted. "Nothing proves that the envelope Gastoun received at the Café Maurel contained the paper my mother showed me. That paper could be from last year, for all I know. If it was factual evidence of murder, as you seem to think, why don't you show it to the police?"

Laura was perplexed. "You doubt the note's authenticity? Do you suspect your mother of lying and the Maurel family of giving false testimony?"

Solange looked at her calmly. "Like my mother, you want to build a case for murder, and you'll cling to anything that seems to help. You're seriously biased. You don't even ask yourself if there might be other explanations for your jumble of findings. I did some research too. But I did it in the most obvious way. By asking our Major about the 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project. He told me that the project was cold turkey. Abandoned. Case closed. So please tell me, why would anyone, ginger or not, want my uncle dead? There is no motive. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a long day ahead of me." She left without another word.

Eisabello came downstairs. Laura was still standing there, stunned by the news and by Solange's unfriendly behaviour.

"Impossible to find the envelop, Laura. I'm sure I left it on Gastoun's bedside table. If you really need it, I'll ask the cleaning lady."

"Yes, please do that," Laura replied. "But Eisabello, why didn't you tell me that the 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project had been abandoned?"

"Because I didn't have the chance," Eisabello replied. "Solange only told me an hour ago. When you arrived this morning, I was about to call you to discuss it. It doesn't make sense to kill Gastoun because he stands in the way of their multi-million-dollar project and then abandon it. It doesn't add up."

Something was definitely wrong, but they had to be sure. "Would it be possible to verify this information, Eisabello?" Laura asked, " As your land is within the perimeter of the project, it would be normal for you to ask the Major how the project is progressing."

"But Solange already asked him yesterday. What is it Laura, don't you trust Solange?" Eisabello asked.

It was a tricky question that Laura couldn't answer honestly. But they had to check Solange's claim. "We have to be sure, Eisabello. Solange could have misunderstood or misinterpreted something the Major told her. If the information is correct, it means that they did not kill Gastoun because of the building project, but for another reason."

Eisabello agreed that this would change their investigation. She promised to talk to the Major that very day and to call Laura afterwards.

As she walked to her car, Laura noticed Derek Morton perched on the wall by the taxi stand, his suitcase beside him. He was obviously waiting for a cab.

"Hi, Laura. I'm on my way to Paris. Holidays are over, back to work and pleasure."

She went to greet him. "You work in Paris?"

"Yes, I've been living and working there for years now," Derek replied. "I've just been visiting my mother for the last few weeks. By the way, I hear you have found a house. That's good news. My mother had nothing that would suit you." Then he added with a chuckle, "Last night she told me there was a

rumour going around that you were going to open a brothel in Tourrettes."

Laura gasped. "Did that come from Leslie? I can't believe it! If he carries on like this, he will force me to sue him for slander."

"I don't know who started it, Laura," Derek replied. "Unfortunately, once these stories are out in the open, they take on a life of their own. I know something about it. My mother wouldn't care, even if it were true. But some people here love these smears, they'll even add to them. It's going to be hard for you in the next few weeks."

The taxi arrived and stopped in front of them. "Sorry, I have to leave now. Here is a card with my address and telephone number. Since you're interested in my work, come and see me the next time you're in Paris. I can show you my paintings. You'll be impressed." He flashed one last Mick Jagger smile and got into the taxi.

Laura looked at the card, it said "Derek Morton - Fine Arts". His workshop was in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the sixth arrondissement, a rather posh and expensive part of Paris. Derek is full of surprises, she thought as she slipped the card into the back pocket of her jeans and walked to her car.

David wasn't home, and the main house seemed silent as well. It was late morning, and before her appointment with the hairdresser Eisabello had recommended, she had some time to write her thoughts and swim.

Late in the afternoon, Eisabello called. She had met the Major.

"You were right to ask me to check, Laura," she said. "It's not that clear-cut. The 'Tourrettes in the Sky' project has been recently suspended, probably because of the Italian investigation into Meridione Asset Management Srl. Until that's resolved, all their projects in France are on hold, but none have been abandoned, and the Major is quite confident that the project will eventually be resumed and completed."

"It still changes a bit, Eisabello," Laura said. "Wouldn't they have seen this coming a long time ago, and rather avoided the risk of murdering someone in such uncertain times, knowing that much bigger trouble lay ahead? I'll have to think about that later. Right now I'm getting ready for my fancy reception tonight. Let's talk tomorrow."

Laura wasn't in the mood for the evening ahead, but she'd promised and the car was at stake. Birch had suggested they meet at 7pm, as Monaco was a fifty minute drive away. When she stepped out onto the terrace in her blue Yves Klein dress and shoes, she found Birch talking to David.

He stopped in mid-sentence and looked at her. After a brief pause, he theatrically quoted with both arms outstretched,

"If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say 'This poet lies;
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.'"

Smiling at him, she replied, "Be scorn'd, like old men of less truth than tongue!"

Birch laughed, and as he kissed her cheeks, he asked in a low voice, "*Can it be that modesty may more betray our sense than woman's lightness?*"

Laura replied into his ear, "*It is not enough to speak, but to speak true*."

He took a step back and looked at her. "Looking at you makes me feel better about the fight with my girlfriend."

"Birch," she replied, "as long as you remember, it's only looking, not touching." He rolled his eyes, and they both said goodbye to David.

Ignoring the French speed limit, Birch drove his Bentley along the Corniche between Nice and Monaco at a sporty pace while listening to Keith Jarrett's Cologne concert. He turned out to be a charming and sophisticated conversationalist who knew more about art than his remarks at their first encounter suggested.

When she asked him if he expected to buy any paintings at tonight's auction, he looked at her and smiled.

"No, they're too expensive for me," he said. "Tonight we'll be guests of Jean Ricard's. Two weeks ago, I bought four original paintings from the Foundation and expressed my interest in starting a small collection. Ricard probably thought it would be in his interest to spoil me. He invited me to lunch at the Foundation and gave me this invitation to tonight's auction. He said I'd meet some interesting people there. That day at the Foundation, I met Andy Warhol. He was busy in a workshop when Ricard showed me around. Warhol seemed friendly. It's amazing to shake hands with a legend."

Laura hadn't imagined Birch capable of such humble feelings.

"Is this your first time in Monaco?" Birch asked.

"No," she said, "I visited a while ago, twice to be precise, for Lanvin fashion shows. But each time we flew back to Paris the next day."

They entered the Principality of Monaco. It was a strange place, in Laura's opinion. Despite its small size, it had been a sovereign nation for more than a century. Two square kilometres for 30,000 people, not to mention the four times that many who are vital to the country. They come here every day because they can't afford to live in Monaco, or aren't allowed to. The official residents have the highest per capita income on the continent and keep a low profile, while the ruling family entertain the world with an ongoing soap opera.

Birch stopped his Bentley in front of the Hotel de Paris. A doorman opened her side of the car and Birch handed his keys to the valet attendant. As they passed the equine statue in the centre of the lobby, a man stroked the horse's right front leg. Laura had been told that gamblers do this in the belief that it will bring them luck. The man glanced at her dress as they passed, and she noticed he had red hair and grey eyes. Her skin crawled, but she shrugged it off, thinking she was getting paranoid.

As they turned towards the Salle Empire, the venue for the auction, Laura looked back. The redhead was now talking to a dark-haired, bearded man. This time her adrenaline rush was justified. These were definitely the two who had followed her

in Saint Paul on Tuesday. Fortunately, they weren't looking in her direction, which hopefully meant they hadn't recognised her. But what were they doing here?

As Laura entered the Salle Empire, her attention was immediately diverted. The "grand siècle" decor was not her taste, but she had to admit it was dazzling. Luxurious marble columns, gilded ceilings, and extravagant frescoes adorned the room. There were many people, but the place was spacious and not overcrowded. About fifteen large round tables were evenly spaced, each seating ten. Most of the women were wearing designer evening gowns and were seated. Only a few were standing, surrounded by men in small groups. Most of the men wore dark suits and bow ties, much like Birch. A gathering of wealthy art collectors.

Birch gave his name to a middle-aged woman representing the auction house. She looked at a list and handed them both a glossy brochure. Another much younger woman led them to a table near the terrace overlooking the palm trees of the Place du Casino. A man who vaguely resembled Maurice Chevalier greeted them.

Birch turned to her gallantly. "Laura, may I present Mr Jean Ricard, director, and owner of the Hervé Ricard Foundation." Then he turned to Ricard, "Mr Ricard, this is my partner, Laura." She looked at Birch in surprise. He smiled at her, embarrassed, so she let it go and extended her hand to Jean Ricard. He bowed so low that for a moment Laura thought he was going to give her an old-fashioned kiss on the hand. Their seats were to the right of Mr Ricard.

The other three couples at their table looked like the modern rich and famous. Similar socialites could be found in photos in the people section of Paris Match. Middle-aged, over-tanned and looking as if they had attended too many lavish receptions and charity galas recently. The group at the table next to theirs was much more animated. Only one of them sat quietly, watching the room. He exuded confidence and authority. Probably in his 60s, he wore an expensive suit with a bow tie and had medium-length, well-groomed grey hair. His close-cropped beard was also grey.

As the man's eyes swept over their table, they paused for a moment on Jean Ricard, who was talking to the woman to his left. The man must have realised that Laura was watching him, because he turned his gaze to her. Laura smiled, but he didn't smile back. When the woman on his left spoke to him, he turned away from their table and looked towards the entrance of the venue.

Laura couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the red-haired man from the lobby walk up to him, bow slightly, and speak close to his ear. The older man nodded, and the redhead walked away.

Laura was stunned. He obviously knew the two men in the lobby. Was that a Mafia boss sitting at the table next to hers? Were his men guarding the lobby while he attended an art auction? Why was he watching Jean Ricard so closely? Laura panicked, but she couldn't just get up and leave. There was no immediate danger, she told herself. They couldn't know that Birch had invited her to come here. But she became extremely

alert. Throughout the evening, she kept one eye and part of her attention on the table with the Mafia boss.

Sitting next to one of the world's leading art dealers, she tried to learn everything he was willing to tell her about the art market. It might also give her a clue why the Mafia boss was here.

"Art has become an alternative asset," Ricard told her. "Investors and pension funds are now looking at the benefits of collecting art, and that's affecting prices. Some paintings double every year, others quadruple. We'll see how much the modern American artists on the auction block will fetch tonight. If you look at that table on the other side," he nodded his head towards the opposite wall, "they're from the British Railways Pension Fund. It's probably the biggest investment fund in Britain. And those at the table near the entrance are from the Norwegian Government Pension Fund, one of Europe's largest investment funds. But, Mrs Wilson, I'm sorry, I've forgotten your first name..." he trailed off.

"Laura," she said.

"Laura... the Latin metonym for victory," he said, looking at her. "Birch didn't mention you when I invited him to the Foundation. I would have invited both of you. You're Birch's spouse, aren't you?"

Laura could have played Birch's game, but she hated lies. If someone stretched the truth in her presence, she might not interfere, but when she was asked such a direct question, she can't help being truthful.

With a smile, she replied, "No, we are just good friends. I hope he hasn't told you otherwise."

"No, I don't think so," Jean Ricard replied. "Except that he called you his partner," he smiled. "That's why I assumed or misunderstood. So your name is Laura..."

He obviously expected her to reveal her surname, but with the Mafia boss sitting nearby and obviously familiar with Jean Ricard, she was perhaps overly suspicious when she simply replied, "Yes, Laura."

Ricard looked at her for a moment, then nodded, and turned to the woman to his left. Her crash course in the 70s art market was obviously over.

Among the American artists sold at the auction were big names like Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns. Prices were in US dollars, but some paintings went for up to eight figures. The white-haired man she suspected of being a mob boss bought five of the most expensive: two Lichtenstein, two Rauschenberg, and a Hopper. Together they came to over sixty million US dollars, not including fees!

When the auction was over, most of the people got up. Some left, others discussed in small groups. Laura noticed that Jean Ricard was standing next to the Mafia boss. They were talking animatedly. Ricard gesticulated with both arms while the grey-bearded man pointed his finger at Ricard's chest. This was even more surprising. Not only did they know each other, they obviously had a disagreement! Suddenly, several thoughts bounced around in her head.

Laura would have preferred to go home, but Birch wanted to have a few drinks at the bar to meet people. "You spent more time with Ricard than you did with me," he complained jokingly.

When they finally stood outside the hotel and the valet attendant handed Birch the keys to his car, Laura asked him, "aren't you afraid of alcohol tests on the road? I can drive."

Birch grinned, "They'd never stop a Bentley. But if you want to drive, go ahead." He tossed her the keys.

On the way back, she asked him if he knew the man at the table next to theirs who had bought five of the paintings. The most expensive of all.

"I saw him last week," Birch replied. "The day Ricard invited me. The man was leaving the Foundation with three other people, including a beautiful woman. Ricard told me he was an Italian industrialist and art collector, but I've never seen the woman before. Unfortunately, she didn't come to the auction with him," he added.

"Did you see the red haired and brown bearded men tonight?" she asked.

Birch laughed. "I don't pay attention to men. I'm straight."

That's all he thinks about, she thought. Birch went on about women, the one he'd seen leaving the Foundation, his girlfriend, and several others he coveted. Laura wasn't really listening; she was literally shovelling through a thicket of thoughts. Against all odds, this evening had given their investigation a whole new perspective.

If Gastoun wasn't killed because he stood in the way of a profitable development project, was his murder related to art? What did Jean Ricard say? Art has become a sought-after investment.

Was Gastoun one of the first victims of this shift?

13

At the same time, somewhere else…

"Che palle! He's not coming now. Fanculo!"

"He smelled a rat. What did you tell him?"

"I told him we have the money. We agreed to meet here. I suggested driving him here and back afterwards, but he said he'd take his own car."

"That was a mistake. You should have insisted, make it mandatory."

"You're always such a clever ass. You just talk, talk, talk. When it comes to acting, you always fuck up."

The other jumped up. “Che cazzo dici? Vaffanculo!“

His partner just gave him a derisive grin. "I was sure from the beginning that this job was going to be shit. I shouldn't have listened to you. "Ten racks to bag an old fart," you said. You didn't tell me she has a whole list! That woman is a loose cannon!"

"The contract came from Lucio. He said it came from the top".

“And you believed him. Lucio, of all morons!”

“Don’t forget that we got the job in Bellagio through him. Fifty grands to smoke the place of that clown.”

"Yes, I remember! What I remember is that he didn't tell us the guy was sleeping in the house."

"Oh dear, now you feel guilty?"

"You stupid idiot. I would have asked for twenty! Let's pack up. He's not coming anymore."

14

“A connection between Gastoun's murder and art?" David repeated her question. "We can't rule anything out, but the idea seems a bit far-fetched."

It was Saturday late morning, and the three of them were sitting on David's terrace. Laura had just told them about Eisabello's phone call, her observations at the art auction the night before, and her subsequent thoughts. David's doubts dampened her enthusiasm, but she didn't know how to explain her idea better.

Rudi came to her rescue. He had drawn a circle on a piece of paper with crosses at three, six, nine, and twelve hours.

He placed the piece of paper on the table in front of them. "This is how I see it, David. We know that a stranger with red hair and an Italian accent left the message for Gastoun," he began, pointing to the twelve o'clock cross. "Either he's the killer or he's connected to the killer. There's also a redhead who seems to be connected to the alleged Mafia boss who presents himself as an Italian businessman, the one Laura met last night." Rudi pointed to three o'clock on the circle.

"Jean Ricard knows the alleged Mafia boss. They had an argument last night." Rudi's pen pointed to six o'clock.

"Jean Ricard is one of the biggest art dealers, he is the owner of the Hervé Ricard Foundation in Saint Paul and Solange's boss.”

“The redhead Laura saw last night is one of the two men who followed her and Solange in Saint Paul a few days ago." Rudi was now at nine o'clock.

"With Jean Ricard being Solange's boss and Gastoun being her uncle, it's a full circle and a lot of coincidences. Don't you think we should hand this over to the police now?"

"What? Your drawing?" David smiled. "Do you really think it's the kind of evidence that will convince the police?"

"No, not the drawing. We'd write them a full report. There is solid evidence." Rudi replied without taking the bait. "Alain Maurel can testify that the redhead left the message and certainly identify him. The paper itself is evidence. And Laura can testify that the redhead was talking to the Mafia boss who was arguing with Jean Ricard, Solange's employer."

David shook his head. "Rudi, I thought you had more perspective. Your facts are nothing but speculations. We have no proof that the two redheads are the same man. To prove it, we'd have to get Alain and Laura to meet the redhead, and I don't know how that's going to happen. As for the envelope, it is missing. Eisabello is the only one who can testify that the note and the envelope were in Gastoun's pocket, and according to her, she has been discredited by the police. So we can't prove that the letter Georges gave to Gastoun contained the note Eisabello showed Laura. As for the rest of your evidence, conversations between a redhead and a greybeard, or disputes between rich and influential people, rarely interest the police".

Davis took a sip of coffee and looked at Rudi. "Although your argument makes sense to me, this circle exists only in our

minds. We speculate that the two redheads are the same man and that the greybeard is a mafia boss. And we can't even prove that Gastoun has anything to do with them.

"Why not speculate that the greybeard is the owner of the Italian investment company?" David continued. "Personally, I'd rather assume it's all to do with real estate. The Mafia is used to being investigated for fraud or various misdemeanours. They know that eventually it'll blow over and they'll carry on as usual. In the meantime, they buy the land. It is possible, I don't want to say 'common', to be killed because you don't want to sell your land to the mafia. But I've never heard of anyone being murdered by them for the sake of a painting. And what has Gastoun got to do with art, apart from being Solange's uncle?”

Men... Laura thought to herself, they never miss a chance for a good cockfight.

"OK then, no 'handing it over to the police'," she said. "We have to keep investigating. If I had a tiny spy camera, I would take a picture of the redhead that we could show to Alain. He will surely cross my path again."

"Let's hope not," Rudi said. "They would start to wonder who you are and why you appear so often. But OK, what's next?"

"I'd still like to visit the Ricard Foundation," Laura said. "David may be right, but that place has become the nexus of our investigation. How do I get in without an invitation?"

"Buy a ticket for the current exhibition," David said with a smile.

"Yes, but as a simple visitor, Laura would not have access to the area outside the exhibition space. The easiest way to get in and move around the ground is through Heinz," Rudi replied. "He showed me the grounds when I helped him open a gigantic kiln he had built to fire a huge sculpture. Another time he invited me to watch an incredible artist paint with both hands simultaneously on large ceramic plates. The artist had to imagine the result because ceramic paints change colour after firing. Last night he told me that he'll be opening a kiln tomorrow. If you want to visit the Foundation, I can tell Heinz you'd like to see his work. But you should know that he's a heavy drinker and an incurable womaniser."

Laura laughed. "I know. McCampbell calls him the 'village satyr'. I had my first experience with Heinz the day I arrived. That was exactly a week ago, by the way!"

Amazing, it was only a week ago! It feels like ages. There goes her dream of a quiet, simple life in the south of France.

"Yes, please ask him, Rudi," she said. "A visit to his workshop will allow me to talk to him about Jean Ricard, the visitors, and any unusual things he might have noticed. I can even sneak around a bit. If I'm caught, I'll pretend I'm visiting Heinz and have just got lost. The Foundation is not a lion's den."

"No, but they have four German Shepherds running free on the grounds," Rudi said.

"If they don't attack the artists working there, they're not aggressive," she said. "I usually get along with dogs."

"Wait," David interjected. "Before you discuss such details, ask yourself what you hope to achieve by visiting the Foundation and snooping around."

"I have no specific plan," Laura replied. "New ideas come when you're not actively looking for them. Three people we have met in this inquiry are connected to the art world. You may doubt the seriousness of Rudi's circle, but he's right that our investigation revolves around the Foundation. And I haven't even seen the place."

Rudi agreed. "I still think art could play a role. We know that investors are increasingly interested in art. They don't care about art the way traditional collectors do, the beauty, the rarity, the mastery. They see art as a profitable commodity. Maybe the Mafia boss is using art to launder his dirty money. Usually when they launder money, they're losing, exchanging a hundred for eighty or even sixty. With the bull market in art, they can actually expect to make a profit."

"OK, I get it," David relented. "If he wants to launder money efficiently, he needs to buy expensive art with the prospect of it multiplying in value. That would be the reason for his visit to the foundation for advice and for the purchase at the Monaco auction. If Rudi contacts Heinz Weiner to get you into the Foundation, Laura, I will talk to Derek Morton to find out more about the dark side of the art market. Maybe Derek heard someone mention the Mafia."

"Derek is in Paris," Laura replied. "I saw him leave yesterday. He told me he usually lives and works in Paris and gave me his card. He may have just got out of prison, but his studio is in

Saint-Germain-des-Prés, just two blocks from Serge Gainsbourg's house. For an unknown artist, Derek is well off."

"That doesn't make him suspicious, Laura. Maybe his mother invested in Paris," David said. "But it's a shame he's gone. I can't question him on the phone about such a delicate matter."

Rudi stood up. "I'm sorry, but I promised Naomi she'd get the car this afternoon. Besides, I have to work on my thesis. But I'm sure I'll see Heinz in the bistro tonight. I'll tell him you're coming to see him tomorrow, Laura. Be there around ten."

Laura walked him to his car. "I should be done by midday. It would be nice to go for a walk up the mountain."

Rudi said he'd prepare a picnic. Then they parted with a tender farewell.

15

On Sunday morning, Laura woke up with a recurring theme in her head, something she had read years ago: "Preparedness breeds survival". She must have dreamed a scene from the book that contained the phrase, but she couldn't remember the dream or the book.

David slept late. She stepped out onto the terrace and took a deep breath. A warm wind carried the fresh scent of the sea. The light was extraordinary, the colours of her surroundings full and sharp, so saturated that on a postcard you'd think they'd been manipulated. Unknown feelings, bordering on ecstasy, bubbled up in her body, coalescing into verses, and she suddenly felt the need to write. Back in the kitchen, she switched on David's coffee machine, took a shower and then went out under the pine trees with her coffee, a pad and a pen.

Two hours later, she drove up to the car park next to the Foundation in Saint Paul de Vence. Several tourist buses had arrived and there was a long queue of visitors at the entrance. Ready to wait her turn and explain that she was visiting Heinz, she saw him coming out of the exhibition area and heading towards his workshop. When she called his name and waved, he motioned for her to come in.

"So you came with a group of tourists?" he joked after the usual French greeting. "You can visit the Max Ernst exhibition later. Come to my workshop, it's always an exciting moment when I open the kiln. This time I have fired my own pieces."

Like Rudi, Heinz was German. He was smaller and at least ten years older than Rudi, with a muscular body and a bald head.

His full blond beard revealed a teasing smile, enhanced by his kind grey-blue eyes. He wore overalls and slippers, nothing else. His mischievous, boyish personality was completely at odds with his hyper-masculine appearance. It was an unusual mix, which certainly explained some of his success with women.

As they walked through the beautiful Mediterranean garden, tended by several dedicated gardeners, three of the four German Shepherds approached them. They sniffed suspiciously at the back of her outstretched hand while Heinz spoke to them, explaining that she was a friend of his. Laura asked him if he was sure they understood. He replied he was pretty sure they didn't understand a word he was saying, but there was a general feeling that they were now connecting with her scent.

Heinz's workshop included a number of buildings for storage, tools and preparation. A large room with several built-in tables provided ample working space, and a separate shed housed four kilns of varying sizes. Each one produced a different result, Heinz explained. The smallest was the largest Laura had ever seen. Outside, next to the door, were the remains of a fifth, even taller kiln that he had built a few months ago. He explained that the two large pieces made by a famous Spanish sculptor didn't fit into any other kiln, they had to build one to measure.

For his own creations, Heinz had used the wood-fired oven, which he preferred. "I'm a 'self-controlled pyromaniac' at heart," he laughed.

As he carefully opened the kiln, he was obviously eager to see the results, and they were stunning. He had fired two large earthenware discs, about a metre in diameter, and two upright, massive sculptures. They were all clean geometric shapes with

sharp edges and clay spilling out in raw bulges at a crack that crossed each sculpture at the golden angle. He had used no glaze, but the pieces had beautiful flame-like colours, from reddish brown to dark blue-grey, some parts shiny, others dull. Laura knew from a potter friend who lived on Table Mountain above Cape Town how difficult it is to fire large, solid pieces of clay. They sometimes explode and damage the other pieces in the kiln.

Although Heinz's ceramic sculptures were stunning, with fiery colours, he wasn't convinced. "The oozing bulges make it look like shit, literally," he proclaimed. "It would be a statement, but not the one I was looking for. I'll scrap them." Then he asked if she'd like a beer or a glass of wine. She told him a glass of water would be fine.

They chatted for a while about his past life, his travels through Europe and Japan to learn from master ceramists, and his work with famous artists. When he asked her about her plans, whether she would stay in the area, she sensed an opportunity to move on to the real purpose of her visit.

She got straight to the point. "At the moment, I'm helping Solange's mother come to terms with her brother's suicide. It has affected her deeply."

"I understand," Heinz said. "When my Japanese girlfriend died in an accident, it devastated me. Suicide must be worse. Gastoun was a nice guy."

"Did you know him?" she asked.

"Everyone in Tourrettes knew him," Heinz replied. "He came to the Foundation a few days before he died to talk to his niece.

He lost his driving license long ago and had to walk all the way from Tourrettes. I met him on his way out. He was upset because Solange wanted to sell the family land. But he didn't seem depressed or suicidal."

Laura was puzzled. "Why did he come all the way to meet her here? He could have talked to her at home."

Hans looked at her. "In Vence? Solange has her apartment in Vence, while Gastoun lived with his sister in Tourrettes. Didn't you know that?"

Laura ignored the question and asked instead, "Didn't she visit them every day?"

"You don't seem to know Solange very well," Heinz laughed. "Solange is not family orientated and visited them as little as possible. She was ashamed of her alcoholic uncle and looks down on her family and the people of Tourrettes. In her eyes, they are country bumpkins, while she sees herself as a sophisticated Parisian. Don't be fooled by her seductive charm, it's all an act. She only cares about herself."

Heinz had to clean the kiln and then reload it. As it would take him the rest of the morning, he suggested she look at the exhibition. It was an opportunity for Laura to visit the grounds of the Foundation.

The property seemed immense, with a large vegetable garden and an orchard adjoining a few pretty cottages grouped together like a small hamlet. As she approached the houses, a large German Shepherd blocked her way, baring his teeth, and growling in a low voice. He was probably the fourth dog that hadn't listened to Heinz's explanations. Since they didn't know

each other, she thought it best to retreat. As you should never turn your back on an aggressive dog, she walked slowly backwards, one step at a time, trying not to look directly at him.

"Brutus, stop it! Sit!" she heard a man's voice. As she turned, Jean Ricard exclaimed, "Ms Laura, what a surprise. Did you come to see me, or did you get lost?"

Laura explained she had been visiting Heinz and now wanted to look at the Max Ernst exhibition.

Jean Ricard shook his head. "Heinz should have told you that the exhibition is on the other side of the workshops. Enjoy it! And please give my regards to Birch." Without another word, he walked past her towards the house. He had made it clear in a friendly way that she was not welcome. The dog looked at her reproachfully and trotted off after Jean Ricard.

Once inside the gallery, instead of turning left to the exhibition rooms, she turned right, following the arrow to the 'Administration'. When a guard tried to send her back, she asked him where Solange's office was. He pointed to the stairs and said: "First floor, just in front of the stairs. But I'm not sure if Ms Giraud works on Sundays."

'I hope not,' Laura thought. There was a sign on the door with Solange's name and title. She knocked, but there was no answer. When she tried the handle, the door opened. Solange wasn't inside. It was a large rectangular office, very modern in design. A well-lined, floor-to-ceiling bookcase took up one of the smaller walls. The large but light white desk and white leather office chair stood in front of the enormous bay window. The view was spectacular, with the fortified village to the left

and the steep hills ahead. On the other side of the room was a comfortable-looking sitting area with four softly upholstered leather chairs. On the two bare walls were original paintings by Paul Klee.

"Are you looking for me, or are you just curious?" Solange asked from behind her left shoulder.

Laura was still standing in the doorway. "Hello Solange!" she tried to kiss her cheek, but Solange stepped back. She was clearly irritated. Trying to appear relaxed and friendly, Laura explained she was visiting Heinz and just wanted to say hello.

"How did you know I was here on a Sunday?" Solange asked rather dryly.

Broadening her smile, Laura replied, "I didn't. I just thought I'd try."

"So you went snooping around? Would you have liked me to do that in your place?"

Given their last encounter on Friday and Solange's current attitude, Laura wanted to avoid any further deterioration in their relationship. Despite her strong desire to see Rudi, this had to be dealt with first. "I was wondering if I could buy you lunch. Not with the Foundation's money. I'll take you to a restaurant in Vence."

Solange walked past her into her office. She turned and stood in front of Laura, one hand on the edge of the door. "Another time, perhaps. I have a lot to do. Goodbye." Then she slammed the door in her face.

Solange's attitude was more than unfriendly, it was rude. Sure, it was unexpected and perhaps not very pleasant to find someone entering your office in your absence. But there was no need to be disagreeable. Was it work-related stress? Laura looked up and down the corridor. Nobody else was working here today.

When she went back to Heinz, he was black with soot and said, laughing, "In Germany, it brings luck to kiss a chimney sweep!" They exchanged some banter. When Laura told him about Solange's reaction, he said it was typical. "We all have a bad day now and then, but Solange only has a good day now and then," he laughed. Laura said she'd come back the next time he opened a kiln and have a better look at the exhibit. Before she left, she asked him if there was a shortcut to Tourrettes.

He suggested a direct route through the forest. "After leaving the Foundation, instead of turning right and going down the hill towards Saint Paul, turn left. Then follow the road through the forest, always keeping to the right."

As she walked back to the car park, she thought her visit hadn't been entirely in vain. She had seen nothing suspicious about the place. But Heinz had told her some interesting things about Solange, and her behaviour today revealed a trait in her personality that Laura hadn't suspected. She also found Ricard strangely reserved, almost rude.

As it was only a short drive to Tourrettes, she left the top closed and drove down the steep road towards the Foundation's exit. There she turned left. After a short while, she

entered the well-kept forest. She drove slowly, enjoying the ride, and thinking about the day ahead.

Two other cars passed her, coming from the opposite direction. Just before the road split, a black Range Rover swerved from behind, passed her, and turned right. 'Well, he's in a hurry to get to the village before me,' she thought, and turned right as well. A few hundred metres after the bend, the black car stood in the middle of the narrow road. she waited a few seconds behind and then honked. No reaction. She wondered if they'd parked there or if the driver wasn't feeling well. To check what was going on, she got out and walked to the left front door of the car.

It was hard to see through the darkened windows. She tapped on the glass. "Are you all right? Would you mind moving over a bit to let me pass?" At that moment she felt someone behind her and was about to turn around when she felt a sudden sting in her neck. Then everything went black.

When she came to, she was in the back seat of the black Range Rover. Her head hitting the frame of the car woke her up. The car was driving quite fast along the coastal road. The driver had red hair. Alarmed, she looked to her right and saw the bearded man with brown hair. He was pointing a gun at her.

"Stay calm. We will take you to our boss for a little talk. If you cooperate, nothing will happen to you." He spoke French with a thick Italian accent.

Kidnapping, just to talk to her? You see that in James Bond films, but this was real! They had drugged and kidnapped her!

This can't be true! How did they find her? Where did they take her?

"What boss? What's going on here? Who are you? Why have you kidnapped me? We could have talked anywhere! Where are you taking me?" She shot these questions with little hope for proper answers as she frantically searched for a way out. She didn't know what to do. The car was too fast to jump out of it, and he would certainly not hesitate to shoot her. Panic washed over her.

The man looked at her with cold eyes. "Don't play the fool and shut up. You'll get your answers soon enough."

They arrived at the port of Saint Laurent du Var, near the airport. The car pulled up next to a deserted pier outside the harbour area, where a large motor yacht was anchored. As far as she could see, there was not a soul around. The red-haired driver got out and opened the door on her side. He also had a gun pointed at her.

"Get out. Walk slowly in front of me and get on the boat."

"Why on the boat? Where is your boss? Where are we going?" Laura was seriously alarmed.

"Shut up and get out," the redhead replied. "Or do you need another shot?"

She looked around in a frenzy. There was no one nearby. She saw a few people at the petrol station, more than a hundred metres away. There was no point in shouting. She would be dead before they got here. If they even answered her calls.

"Esci, puttana!" the redhead shouted, pointing his gun in her face. The brown-bearded man stood beside him and grabbed her arm to pull her out. She didn't see what else she could do, so she walked ahead of them. A narrow plank led onto the boat.

"Get in the lower cabin," the redhead ordered. He locked the door behind her.

The engine started. Someone pulled the plank, threw the heavy mooring ropes onto the deck, and jumped on the boat. Then they cast off. After less than two minutes, the boat picked up speed. Through the rather large portholes, she could see that they were heading straight out.

This stretch of coast had no islands nearby. Maybe their boss was on the boat, or on a bigger one further out. That's why they didn't shoot her in the forest. They're probably trying to get her to talk. They want to know who she works for, who else is involved and what information they have. But after that, they can't let her go. Laura has seen their faces. They'll make her disappear. Shoot her and dump her body in the sea.

They had passed the headland, and now the sea was choppy. The boat had slowed down to avoid constantly hitting the short waves. Laura had to do something, and fast. It would be impossible to overpower two armed men. The door was locked, and the portholes sealed. She checked the lockers. They were all empty. This was a rented boat.

She was still searching when the man with the brown beard opened the door. "Come out," he ordered, pointing his gun at her. "Over there. Walk in front of me to the back of the boat."

That's it, she thought. The last moments of her life. She scanned her surroundings desperately. Her mind was racing. She had to divert his attention, jump overboard.

That's when she saw it. Her last chance. The mooring line! Carelessly thrown onto the deck. When he stepped on the twisted rope, she bent down, grabbed the rope, and pulled with all her might. The man stumbled, lost his balance, and staggered backwards. She took a deep breath, dived overboard, and stayed underwater for as long as she could.

When she stuck her head out to get some air, the boat was about 200 metres away and turning. She took a deep breath and dived back under. Her lungs were about to explode when she heard the engine passing overhead. She returned to the surface. They were a few hundred metres away and turning again. Her breathing had barely calmed down. When she saw them approaching, she took a quick breath and dived again. She stayed about three or four metres below the surface until everything went black. Then she heard the boat pass overhead.

When she came up, she felt completely drained, and wondered how much longer she could keep going. She noticed they were getting further away. It is difficult to see a head in the open sea or to judge your position visually, especially when the waves are choppy. There are no landmarks in the open water. They had lost the spot where she had jumped and were searching in another area.

She looked around for orientation. The coast and the skyline of Nice had disappeared from view. She could only see the top of the hills behind Tourrettes and the Alps in the distance. As the skyline of Nice was no longer visible, she estimated she was

between 15 and 20 km from the coast. She took off her shoes, trousers, and shirt, and started swimming towards the hills. The gangster's boat was slaloming away.

She tried not to panic at the thought of the distance to shore. In Durban she had swum along the coast, a few hundred metres out, coming to the beach from time to time to rest. Two hours swimming in a pool was nothing compared to what lay ahead. It would be at least eight hours. And that's if the currents didn't get in the way.

She encouraged herself she was well prepared for long-distance swimming. Very early on, she learnt good breathing techniques and a strong body position. She tried to relax and get into a routine, mentally repeating the instructions she had memorised. Neutral head position. Elbows high. Hands cupped during strokes. Fingers slightly apart. Two-stroke kicks. Use as few muscles as possible. Count your strokes. After five hundred strokes, roll over to rest, count to thirty, roll back. And so on.

Soon she lost count and just kept swimming. Try to stay positive, she told herself. Back on the beach, she would call a taxi for the village. Meet Rudi. But she had no money. Just a panty and a bra. And eight hours of swimming ahead of her. Hard to think positive thoughts in such a situation. Anyway, she noticed that happy thoughts made her drowsy, while worries kept her alert.

After a while, she didn't feel her muscles anymore. Her movements became mechanical and she thought she could go on forever. But she was thirsty, which is odd when you are swimming in water. She had had nothing to drink since the glass of water Heinz had offered her in the morning. She hadn't eaten

either, apart from a yoghurt and an apple for breakfast. There were people who had swum across the Channel, but they'd had a team in a boat following them. They could eat and drink as long as they stayed in the water.

Her situation was dire. At this point, she had little doubt that she would reach the shore. But she'd have to find some clothes and call someone for help. The only local numbers she knew by heart were those of David and Eisabello. Rudi didn't have a phone, anyway.

The biggest problem was the Mafia. From now on, she was in their crosshairs. The two guys didn't find her in the water, but they weren't sure she was dead either. They'll keep an eye out for her, ask around, and do whatever it takes to finish their job.

That meant she couldn't even go to the police and tell them that two killers were after her and that she'd been kidnapped! Even if the police believed her, what could they do to protect her? All she could do was describe the two men and their car, which was probably rented or stolen, anyway. The hitmen had a better chance of finding her than the police had of finding them! As long as these killers were on the street, she wasn't safe here!

After what seemed like an eternity, she was getting cold and feeling exhausted. The lack of food and water was taking its toll. She turned onto her back and tried to relax, but a short wave washed over her and she coughed out the salt water. With growing fatigue, defeatist thoughts appeared. She may be at the peak of her physical powers at just over thirty, but can she swim for eight hours without food or water?

When she stopped for a moment and pedalled to get her bearings, she noticed a rise on the horizon ahead. The mountains behind Tourrettes were now to the right and she still couldn't see the skyline of Nice. The current! David had mentioned that there was a strong surface current along the coast, from east to west. Instead of swimming straight back to the beach, she swam diagonally towards Cannes, which was much further away! If she didn't get out of the current, it might drag her along the coast.

The sun was halfway down the slope; it must have been around 5 pm. She'd been swimming for over four hours. It was best not to think about anything. Just the next two strokes, breathing in, the next two strokes, breathing in...

At first she wasn't sure, but then she clearly heard the engine. She stopped and looked around to see where it was coming from. Fortunately, it wasn't the powerful engine of the gangster's boat. It was the low rumble of a small inboard. Turning, she saw the bright colours of the bow appear to her left. If it continued in that direction, obviously towards Nice, the boat would pass her at a distance. She waved both arms, kicked the water, and shouted as loud as she could. For about a minute, the boat kept going, and had almost passed her when the man at the stern reacted. He slowed the engine and turned the boat towards her. She cried with joy.

"Hitchhiking, huh?" the man joked when he was a metre away. "Give me your hand, mademoiselle, and get in. Wow, you came all the way from Corsica in that outfit?"

He was an elderly fisherman with kind eyes, sitting at the back of his beautiful 'pointu', the typical local wooden fishing

boat. Each one is painted in a unique way, but always in bright colours.

He offered her a jacket. "Take this to cover yourself. Do you want something to eat or drink?"

"Thank you," she put his jacket over her shoulders, "just water, that would be nice."

He handed her a bottle of water. "What brought you so far from shore, mademoiselle?" he asked.

"I jumped off a boat out there," Laura replied. "A fast motorboat." She didn't want to tell a lie, so she stayed as close to the truth as she could.

"Jumped off? A fight?" He looked concerned.

"Something like that. I didn't realise how far back I had to swim before I jumped," which was true. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going back to Nice, Port Lympia," he replied. "Shall I drop you somewhere else?"

Laura thought Nice might be safer than St Laurent. David wouldn't mind driving a few more miles to pick her up. "Nice is fine. I'll call a friend to pick me up. You don't mind if people see you have a half-naked woman in your boat?"

"You've got to be kidding me. I'll be famous! The talk of the town for years to come," he laughed.

His name was Pipoun. He explained he wasn't fishing today, but was on his way back from visiting a relative in Golfe Juan. He went on to describe the peaceful and beautiful life his family

had enjoyed for generations. Now his son wanted to make more money.

"He will regret it soon enough," Pipoun said, "but the boat and our apartment will always be there for him."

They talked all the way, and after almost two hours they reached the entrance to the harbour. As they approached the jetty, two fishermen waved at them. When Pipoun climbed ashore to attach the rope to the peer, a dozen of his friends were standing there.

"Hey Pipoun, where did you find this beautiful nymph?" one of them shouted. "You've always been secretive about where you fish. Now tell us everything. At your age, even one nymph is already too much." They all roared with laughter.

"She fell off a motorboat out there," Pipoun replied. "I saw her swimming to shore. Instead of your dumb jokes, one of you should bring her a cloth so she can climb out of the boat."

Someone brought a large blanket, and Laura gratefully used it to cover herself, tying it over her left shoulder. Pipoun accompanied her to the harbour master's office. Laura thanked him and told him she'd enjoyed their time together and that she'd be back, but she couldn't say when.

"Just come to the harbour. Don't wait for me out there in the water. I don't visit my nephew every day," he joked. She kissed him on both cheeks.

When Laura explained to the harbour master she had jumped from a motorboat and that Pipoun had picked her up while she was swimming ashore, the official asked for details.

He wanted the names of the captain, the boat, and so on. It was a crime to abandon someone at sea. He wanted her to report the men. She told him they probably hadn't noticed; it was all her fault. No one had been hurt, and she didn't want to press charges. Eventually, he reluctantly gave in, but took down her name and address. She asked him if she could use his phone to call a friend to pick her up.

David answered on the first ring. "Laura!" he was obviously relieved. "Where are you? What happened to you? Rudi found your empty car in the woods between Saint Paul and Tourrettes!"

She turned to the wall and lowered her voice, convinced that the harbour master spoke fluent English. "David, I'll explain everything later. I can't now. Please listen, don't tell anyone I called you, only Rudi. He needs to know I'm OK. Then come to the marina in Nice. I'm in the harbour master's office. Bring clothes and shoes. And come as soon as you can. But drive carefully."

"You mean the port in Nice? How did you get there?" David asked. "OK, I'll tell Rudi and I'll be there in about half an hour."

When David arrived with the outfit and shoes Laura had bought in Cap 3000, she was talking to the harbour master. A few passers-by had looked at her curiously and she was sure had come to the wrong conclusion. The harbour master had given her a glass of rum and told her some amusing stories about his experiences with visiting yachts. He explained that the ‘pointus’ only occupied a small part of the marina. Port Lympia was the oldest port on the French Riviera and also accommodated large yachts, merchant ships and ferries.

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After getting dressed in an adjoining room, she thanked the harbour master for his help and company. He said she could leave the blanket, he'd give it to Pipoun, who always brings him croissants in the morning.

After leaving the office, she instructed David to drive only a hundred metres and stop where they could talk without anyone overhearing. She gave him a brief version of what had happened. As she summarised her adventure, David's eyes got bigger and bigger. "Let's go to the police. This is way out of hand!"

"Not the police, David! If I report to the police, the killers will know I'm alive and it becomes a race to see who finds whom first. The police cannot ensure my safety. Right now, the killers aren't sure if I'm still alive. I jumped when they were between ten and fifteen miles out at sea. Not many can swim that far. They'll think I drowned. But they'll keep an eye on my usual spots for a few days, just to be sure."

"So, what do you decide? Where you'd like to go now?" David asked.

"Tonight, I'll get a room in a small hotel here in Nice," she replied. "I need to rest. Let's meet tomorrow morning, the three of us, at my hotel. Have you told Rudi I'm OK? I'm hungry."

David stopped at Place Garibaldi to buy an extra-large portion of socca, a culinary speciality of Nice. It's a giant pancake made from chickpea flour and olive oil, baked, and browned on a large plate. The owner of the socca stand pointed out a charming little hotel on Rue Cassini. It was high season,

but there happened to be rooms available. David paid for the room and took the hotel's business card. Knowing Laura was exhausted, he handed her the socca and left 100 francs, promising to be back with Rudi in the morning.

Laura took the socca back to her room and devoured it. It was incredibly tasty. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have gone out for more. Instead, she had a long shower, then collapsed into her comfortable bed and fell asleep within minutes.

16

The phone in her room woke her from a deep sleep. Totally disoriented, Laura picked it up. Upon hearing that two men were waiting for her at the reception, she had a moment of panic. But then she reassured herself that the gangsters couldn't find her here, and they wouldn't wait politely at the reception. It could only be David and Rudi. "Please tell them I need ten minutes," she said. She opened the curtains and looked up at the sky. The sun had already risen over the rooftops. It must be after ten.

When she came down to the lobby, she saw David and Rudi sitting in the two chairs near the front desk, talking. Rudi was facing the lift and got up when he saw her. He came over and took her in his arms. They stood there without talking, just holding each other, until she noticed David behind and greeted him too. "Breakfast is only served until 10 am," David said, "but I got us coffee to take in the hotel garden, and Rudi bought some pastries in Tourrettes."

Once they were seated, she recounted the events of the previous day, including her visit to the Foundation, the kidnapping, and her escape.

"How did they know you were on this road?" Rudi wondered. "They must have been following you, but from where and for how long?" He then explained that they were extremely worried, but there was nothing they could do.

When she hadn't arrived in Tourrettes by 1 pm, he drove to the Foundation. On his way to Saint Paul, he found her abandoned car in the woods. After searching the woods for a

while, he went to see David, and they went together to the police in Vence.

"The police asked me if you were suicidal, disabled, ill, or otherwise at risk," David explained. "When I said no, they asked us to come back on Wednesday. As far as they were concerned, your disappearance wasn't a cause for concern. When an able-bodied adult goes missing, they always wait three days before doing anything. Most missing adults usually turn up or show some sign of life within three days, they told us."

Rudi continued. "The fact that you disappeared without a word, leaving your car in the woods, didn't change their minds. They told us they'd seen stranger things happen when women decided to leave. And if they were to investigate every missing adult, they'd have to hire an army."

"So we did our own search, asking everyone who knew you. I pass on the few idiotic answers we got. But Eisabello was really worried. Perhaps we should let her know you're fine."

"Don't tell her you found me. Don't tell anyone, please! I need to disappear for at least a few days until I can find a way to get those gangsters arrested. I can't go back to your house right now, David. Or to Tourrettes," she looked at Rudi.

They both nodded. "I understand," Rudi said, "but it can only be for a short time, Laura. You can't hide forever. What are you going to do now? You don't want to leave the country, do you?"

Laura shook her head. "No, it wouldn't solve anything, anyway. The Mafia has long arms. I won't be safe anywhere. Before, I was just a nuisance they wanted to get rid of. Now that I've seen their faces, I pose a risk. We have to get the police to

act, but how? If I go to the police and tell them I've been kidnapped, the Mafia will know I'm still alive and redouble their efforts to find me. "

David looked at her. "Without a convincing reason, the police won't do anything until Wednesday. And then you'll just be a missing person. Apart from a poster in every police station, there won't be much action."

"David, you can't go to the police and tell them I'm still missing," Laura said. "That would be a false report. Being a foreigner, you could get into trouble."

"I know," David said. "But if we don't report you missing, the gangsters will assume we know you're alive."

There was a moment of silence. All three of them stared at the silver coffeepot sitting between them on the garden table.

"You could hide somewhere and we could continue the investigation," Rudi suggested.

Laura shook her head. "We don't know what the Mafia knows about me. How did they find me in Saint Paul? I suppose they know a lot about my places, my connections. If I was followed, you'll be followed now for a while, I'm sure. If you keep investigating, it will only be a matter of time before you end up on the boat like me. And you're not as good a swimmer as I am." The joke was lost on them.

Suddenly, she had an idea. "If I can't show my face here, the only place I can think of to continue the investigation is Paris."

"Why Paris?" Rudi asked.

The idea took shape in her mind. Paris was a good option. "I am more and more convinced of a connection between Gastoun's murder and art. I'm convinced that the grey-bearded man I saw in Monaco is pulling the strings. His two thugs who kidnapped me pretended he wanted to talk to me. The greybeard had been in contact with Jean Ricard before their altercation in Monaco. Birch saw him leave the Foundation a week ago. And Ricard had seen me yesterday. Perhaps he informed the gangsters or their boss."

"Once in Paris, I can visit the Foundation's premises there and talk to the staff to see if they know the greybeard. I can also visit Derek. He knows the dark side of the art market pretty well. And Paris is safe for me. It's a big city. If you want to disappear, don't go somewhere isolated. Hide in a crowd."

Rudi said he will try to find out the identity of the greybeard. "But we have neither a name nor a photo."

"I can sketch a portrait of him," Laura replied. "That's something I'm quite good at. In London, I'd sit for hours in the park or on the terrace of a pub and draw people, just for fun. Sometimes, if they were interested, I'd give them the drawing. It helped to train my facial memory and my ability to notice details. I'm also going to draw portraits of the two killers as I remember them. If anything happens to me, you can take the drawings to the police."

"Why not right now?" David asked.

"Because we can't prove they've broken the law. Unless I tell the police that they kidnapped me. And then it's your guess who finds who first."

David didn't seem convinced, but being practical, he asked if she had a place to stay. "Hotels in Paris are expensive," he said.

"I'll get in touch with Eugenie," Laura replied. "When I was working in Paris, Eugenie was my best friend. After I left, we gradually lost touch. The last I heard, she was still at Balmain, now managing the staff. That was three years ago. She's Belgian, and I don't think she left Paris. Her partner worked there too. If I find her, I'm sure she'll put me up for a while."

They agreed David would bring her suitcase, documents, and money in the late afternoon. "Don't report me missing, David. Not only would that be a false report, it would also restrict my movements in Paris. If anyone asks, say you think I'll be back soon."

Turning to Rudi, she added: "I don't want to lose my house in the village. Rudi, please tell Patrick to get on with his work."

They agreed to meet again in the evening. Rudi went to the campus to prepare for the discussion with his supervisor. David left her some money for her train ticket and went to get her things.

Laura walked down Rue Cassini and found a stationery shop nearby. First, she wanted to do the drawings. Back in her room, she got to work. In less than an hour, she had three portraits that she thought bore a fair resemblance to the two killers and their boss. She even coloured them lightly with crayons to show the colour of their hair and eyes, as well as the colour of their faces. They weren't photographs, but they were certainly better than the usual drawings of people wanted by the police.

The Mafia boss was the easiest. She had him in front of her all night at the art auction in Monaco. When she was satisfied with the drawings, she went back to the stationery shop. They had a colour photocopier. After putting the drawings and copies in her room, she got a city map at the reception and went to buy her train ticket.

Although she had been warned, Laura was still surprised by the loud bang at midday. The noon cannonade is a tradition in Nice that goes back over 100 years.

If you ignore the twenty years immediately after the French Revolution, Nice has only been French for just over a century. The old town, called 'Vieux Nice', could be in Italy, although the French take better care of the facades of their buildings. The narrow, shady pedestrian streets are lined with tall houses. Their facades are neatly painted in various shades of yellow, ochre, orange and pink, dotted with long, narrow shutters in all shades of turquoise and green. The ground floors were traditionally occupied by grocery, clothing, and hardware stores. Now there are more and more restaurants and galleries.

She left the busy alleys of the old town and crossed a park to reach Place Massena, the town's central square. With its 19th century reddish bourgeois houses and white colonnades, some fifty porticoes on three sides of the square, it is very reminiscent of the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. Leaving the square, she walked down the wide commercial Avenue Jean Médecin, shaded by enormous trees, past the Société Générale building.

Two years earlier, the famous "robbery of the century" had taken place here. During a long weekend in July 76, the legendary Albert Spaggiari and his team had completely

emptied the bank's coffers. To achieve this feat, they had to carry 100 kg of equipment through 3 km of underground sewers. From there, they spent several weeks digging a tunnel that led them directly into the bank's vault. They left a message painted on the wall: 'No guns, no violence, and no hate'.

From the end of the grand avenue, she could already see Nice's beautiful central station. Its Louis XIII style was inspired by the public buildings of Paris and contrasted with the more southern architecture of Nice.

There was a queue at the long-distance ticket counter. As the line slowly moved forward, she started chatting to the lady in front of her. When she said that she wanted to buy a ticket to Paris, the lady was pessimistic. "There won't be any seats available," she said. "You've picked the worst time, madam. It's peak holiday season, and in France all the long-distance trains pass through Paris."

The woman behind her said she had overheard their conversation. She had come to get a refund because she can't travel. If Laura wanted, she could buy her sleeper seat on the 10:30 train that night. The ticket wasn't nominative. Laura gave her the money, thanked them both and left.

Despite the infinitesimal chance of meeting the killers, Laura remained cautious as she walked back, watching the streets. Whenever a big black car appeared, she turned quickly to look in a shop window.

Rudi was back at five. They had a moment of tenderness before David arrived at six. As he wasn't sure what she wanted to take along, David had packed all her belongings into a bulging

suitcase and used her car to transport it. Laura took out the things she was sure she wouldn't need in Paris and packed her crayons and photocopies. She paid him back the money he'd lent her and gave him copies of the three portraits. Rudi got a copy of the drawing of the Mafia boss.

"It's 7 pm now," David said. "You have three hours to say goodbye. I'll give you some space. Laura, call me as soon as you have a place to stay. And 'merde'!" That's the French way of wishing someone 'good luck'.

Laura hugged him tightly and gave him the most reassuring smile she could muster. "Thanks for everything, David. If I need any help, you'll know. You always have."

"Yes, and I'll use the tele-transporter, as usual," he grinned, then left.

Laura put her suitcase into Rudi's car. He asked her where she wanted to go and she said she'd like to be near the sea. He parked the car on the Cours Saleya and they walked along the beach towards the harbour. When they reached the bottom of the castle hill, they sat down on the low wall facing the sea.

The whole Baie des Anges opened up before them, with Nice to the right and the mountains behind Vence and Tourrettes in the background. These were the mountains that had led her back yesterday. She put her arm around Rudi's shoulder and leaned against him.

"Would you like me to come with you to Paris, Laura?" he asked. "After what happened yesterday, you might need a bodyguard."

She looked up to see if he was serious. "What are you going to do if they point two guns at us, Rudi?"

He smiled. "I can jump in their faces, like Bruce Lee. I can pull you down and cover you with my body... No, but I can make sure that doesn't happen."

"How?" she asked. When he didn't reply, she continued, "Rudi, as soon as I'm with Eugenie, I'll call David. He will give you her number. We will talk every night. I'll tell you what you can do to help me, and you'll come if necessary. But now look at the sunset, the colours are incredible!"

The sky was all shades of warm colours, from pale blue over their heads to Ferrari red where the sun set behind the low hills of the Cap d'Antibes. The colours were reflected in the calm sea of the bay, illuminating the facades of the buildings in warm yellows and oranges. It was a glorious image that made Laura happy. She lay on the wall's top and rested her head on Rudi's thighs, then she closed her eyes.

She must have fallen asleep. Suddenly Rudi moved and said, "It's after nine, time to go, Laura. You'd better get on the train as soon as it arrives, so that no one takes your place."

The train was already standing on the platform. A dense crowd pushed past them anxiously, as if people were afraid the train would leave without them. As soon as Laura had put her suitcase on her place in the sleeper, she pushed her way out and hugged Rudi tightly.

"Rudi, move into my house in the village as soon as it's ready, so Naomi can sell hers."

He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "That would be wonderful. But first try to come back in one piece."

A railway worker arrived to shut the doors. They shared one last long kiss before she got into the carriage and looked out the window. Rudi stood on the platform until the train took a long turn.

Laura lay down and slept the whole ten hours of the journey.

17

Laura couldn't say she was fresh when the train pulled into the Gare de Lyon in the centre of Paris. Her mouth was pasty, her clothes were sticky, and she was hungry. As she left the station, she could smell the typical scent of Paris. She went to the first café on the Place Louis Armand and ordered a Grand Crème and four croissants.

You have a good appetite, miss," the waiter said as he carried her order to the terrace. It was after nine o'clock and the square was bustling. Traffic was heavy, cars were speeding, horns were honking and drivers were shouting through their open windows. The atmosphere of Paris.

Laura didn't have Eugenie's current address, but she thought she might find her at the Balmain headquarters on Rue François Premier. Surely, Eugenie wouldn't hesitate to accommodate her, but she had to know that Laura was in the Mafia's crosshairs. She trusted Eugenie to keep the information to herself, both shared a distaste for gossip.

Slightly refreshed, Laura went down to the tube station, bought a day ticket, and took line 1 to Franklin Roosevelt. From there, it was a five-minute walk to Balmain.

The big wooden door of the Balmain building was open. She walked in. Little had changed in ten years. A woman passing by glanced at her and walked on, then stopped. "Laura!" she exclaimed. It was Monique. She had been a merchandising assistant ten years ago, and they had been out a few times together. They chatted for a moment, but her colleagues were

expecting Monique for a meeting. Laura asked if Eugenie still worked for the company.

"Of course she does," Monique said. "She's our human resources manager. Her office is on the fourth floor. Make sure you find some time for me." She kissed Laura goodbye and hurried off.

With its high ceilings, mouldings, and period furniture, the fourth floor had kept the Haussmann style so dear to Pierre Balmain. None of the doors revealed the name or function of their occupants. Laura knocked on what had been the personnel manager's office ten years ago.

"Yes, come in." She recognised the voice. Eugenie looked up from her desk as she opened the door. Her eyes widened. There was a huge smile on her face, and she rushed from behind her desk to take Laura in her arms.

"Laura! I can't believe it. We haven't seen each other in what, ten years? I've been thinking about you and us many times."

"Me too, Eugenie, but I've been travelling a lot and... I'll tell you all about it later." Laura stepped back and looked at her friend at arm's length. "'Gosh, you look better than ever! Why are you stuck behind a desk instead of strutting down the catwalk?"

"That's the way it is now, Laura. Models are getting younger and younger. You were what, nineteen when you started? You were the youngest then, now it's the average age. But I like what I'm doing and the pay cheque is bigger. Look, I have a very busy day ahead of me. I won't even eat at lunchtime. But I'll try to be

free by 6 pm. I see your suitcase and hope you haven't booked a hotel. You're staying with us, Laura, no discussion. Wait."

Eugenie walked over to the desk and rummaged through her bag, which was on a small table behind her. "Here are the keys. The address is 3bis, Rue Bénouville, 3rd floor. I'll call a taxi. It's a great address, but no lift, I'm afraid. Take the guest room and make yourself at home. Erik isn't in today. He would have loved to see you. But if you stay a few days, he'll be back on Monday." They kissed goodbye and Laura left.

On her way out, she had a quick look at the 'cabin', as the backstage room is called. It's where the models get dressed. It was already busy as the first private presentation of the day had started at 10am. The real hustle and bustle usually begins around 2pm in preparation for the afternoon presentation.

Balmain had a 'cabin' of eight full-time in-house models. Although they all reflected the unmistakable look and spirit of Balmain, each model had a specific role to play. The dresses she wore were tailored and styled to match her body and personality. Although she was still quite young, Laura presented the elegant evening designs. The last season she worked at Balmain, Erik even asked her to present the 'wedding dress', which was always the grand finale at the end of his show.

Laura stepped into the street where the taxi was waiting. As she confirmed the address, she noticed the disappointment on the driver's face. Apparently, it was only a brief ride. A few minutes later, he pulled up in front of the Malaysian Embassy.

When Laura looked sceptically at the building, wondering if he'd got it right, the driver said: "It's on the other side, ma'am.

If you don't mind, I'm blocking the road and there are already two cars behind me."

She paid, he handed her the suitcase and left. 3bis was a rather narrow old property, squeezed between newer buildings on either side. But its location in the 16th arrondissement, near the famous Avenue Foch, made it a chic address. Laura walked up the large, winding staircase.

She was surprised when she entered the apartment, which was much larger and brighter than she had expected from the outside. Eugenie had kept the typical Hausmann mouldings and painted them the same colour as the walls, a very light grey. The furniture was modern but well integrated. The apartment had a large living room and a modern kitchen that opened onto a dining room with a long table. There were two bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, one of which was obviously the guest room. After unpacking, she took a bath and almost drifted off in the tub. When she went to lie down on the bed, she immediately fell asleep. The last two days had been exhausting.

By the time Eugenie arrived at half past six, Laura had been writing her thoughts for an hour and was feeling much better. Eugenie poured two glasses of wine and they sat in comfortable deckchairs on the small terrace at the back of the house. Below them Laura could see a well-kept garden.

"Eugenie, before we talk about anything else, and before you agree to put me up for a few days, you need to know why I am here." She rearranged her report to include only what Eugenie needed to know.

When she was finished, Eugenie shook her head. "You certainly know how to make your days interesting, Laura. As long as you don't invite those killers into our house, you can stay as long as you like. And of course you can give David our number. Here, I'll write it down." She handed her a piece of paper. "Now tell me what you've been up to since we lost contact."

They exchanged memories until Eugenie's partner Vincent arrived at 8 pm. The two had been together almost since kindergarten and were still a loving couple.

At 9 pm she rang David. "Laura! I was hoping you'd call tonight. Rudi somehow got the name of the Mafia boss. Don't ask me how. I think it's through a journalist he knows. The name of the man you met in Monaco is Benito Esposito, an Italian business executive and a well-known art collector. Rudi phoned the auction house, pretending to be Esposito's secretary. They confirmed the delivery address of the paintings Esposito had bought in Monaco. Guess where?"

Laura thought about the obvious. "Naples, Palermo? Monaco?"

"All wrong," said David. "He lives in Paris."

"Paris?" Laura's first reaction was one of surprise. She didn't feel threatened. Paris is a vast city with millions of people, and the killers couldn't have known she'd come here. But unlike in the south of France, she'd never heard of Mafia activity in the Paris area. Why was this guy living here?

David seemed as surprised as she was. "Hard to believe, isn't it? According to Rudi's journalist, he's not into real estate. The

Esposito family made their fortune in the chemical industry, a major sector of the Italian economy. Apparently, they own half of Marghera, near Venice, one of the major centres of the chemical industry in Italy."

"Well, they're no angels either," she said. "I've heard that some of these factories dump their toxic waste directly into the Venice lagoon."

"True," David said. "But Rudi's journalist had no information directly linking the Esposito family to Mafia activities. However, they were in the news a few years ago during the toxic barrels scandal. You must have heard about it. The Camorra has a monopoly on waste disposal in many regions of Italy. For years they had been dumping industrial waste in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Libya. A lot of it came from Marghera."

"Do you have this guy's address in Paris?" she asked David. She didn't want to visit him, but rather avoid the area.

David gave her the address. "It's a large private mansion in the Invalides district of the seventh arrondissement," he said.

They talked for a while. Laura told him she'd rest for a day and then try to see Derek to ask him about this Esposito guy and possible Mafia involvement. "Last week, he invited me to visit his workshop. I got the impression that he's still making fakes, but now on demand. In that case, inviting me would be a sign of trust. I'll ask him to reciprocate my discretion and to keep our meeting confidential."

"That's still quite a risk," David objected. "And he might ask for what reason."

"My answer will be evasive," she said. "Let him imagine what he wants. The important thing is that he does not blow the trumpet everywhere."

She gave him Eugenie's telephone number. David said Rudi would call her the next evening, and they wished each other a good night.

When Laura returned to the terrace, Eugenie and Vincent were enjoying a glass of wine. Eugenie asked if everything was all right because Laura seemed lost in thought. She explained what David had told her.

"Listen Laura," Vincent said, "I understand your reasons for not wanting to press charges right now for kidnapping and attempted murder. But what has happened to you is terrible! You yourself have little doubt that the next time they will kill you for good. You can't expect this to go away, to resolve itself!"

"What do you suggest?" Laura asked.

"I have a proposal," Vincent replied. "My tennis partner of many years is an inspector in the criminal investigation department at the Paris police headquarters. I'll ask him to talk to you in private. You will tell him everything you know and he will tell you what to do, or what the police will do if you report it. Would you agree?"

There were only two reasons Laura continued this dangerous investigation. She wanted to gather evidence for the police to reopen Gastoun's murder case. But more importantly, she wanted to make sure that the Mafia killers were caught before they caught her.

"I agree. Do you think it would be possible to meet him at a bistro?"

"Even better," Vincent said. "I'll ask him to come here tomorrow night. If that's all right with you, Eugenie?"

His wife smiled. "I'd much rather have a visit from a detective than a murderer."

Vincent laughed. "I think we all would. And Jules is a nice guy, you'll see. His name is Jules Sébille. I'll ask him if he can come around seven."

They talked for a while about life in Paris, the trips the two of them had taken or were planning to take, and their plans to adopt children. Eventually Laura excused herself, tiredness catching up with her.

They were both understanding. "You swam more in one afternoon than I do in a year, Laura, and I go twice a week!" Eugenie said as she wished her good night.

18

The next evening, elsewhere...

They had been on the phone for two hours. She'd called from Rome to tell him she'd accepted the job offer. She would leave Italy on Monday to start her job at the University of Tokyo at the beginning of September.

So that's the end of it. They'll visit from time to time, of course. But it will never be the same. I'll find another partner, he thought, half the people on earth are women. But Guilia is really exceptional. She's beautiful, smart, independent, caring, funny...

No more steamy nights. No more deep conversations about transience or ethics. Guilia won't tell him about East Asian culture, which is her thing. No more travelling together to see the wonders of the world. And no more plans to spend their lives together. She's only thirty-five. She'll meet other men. Younger men.

Perhaps he should accept the change and concentrate on expanding his international operations. If the family accepts it. Some of them were clearly unhappy with his growing influence. There were rules and he didn't always play by them.

He went back inside and pressed a button. The huge bay windows closed silently. But the alarm system was still not working. None of the video tapes had recorded anything all day. Marco said, tomorrow they'll replace the faulty relay. Until then, the security company would step up their patrols. In any case, he trusted people to be more reliable than technology.

After the call, he'd hesitated for a moment about having a glass of grappa, but he'd finally decided against it. He didn't enjoy the effects of alcohol. Cocaine was much better. But it quickly became a habit, so he decided not to do that either.

The thought of living without Guilia made him feel drained and empty. Despite the early hour, he decided to go to bed. Marco will help him organise the delivery from London tomorrow. It will give him a mental break.

Lying in bed, he listened for a moment to Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major on the hi-fi system built into the ceiling. Feeling himself drifting off, he stopped the music and fell asleep.

Suddenly he sat up and opened his eyes in the darkness. He wasn't sure, but he had a vague impression of a sharp noise that had woken him. There it was again. Like metal against a solid object.

He waited a moment, then turned on the light in his bedroom. He got up, walked to the door and opened it. The hallway seemed empty.

There it was again. He walked towards the stairs where the sound seemed to be coming from. As he turned the corner, he felt a sting in his neck and everything went black.

He didn't feel his body being dragged back into the bedroom and laid upside down on the bed, with his head bent over the edge.

Nor did he hear the thud of his severed head hitting the ground, or smell the metallic odour of blood as it gushed from the trunk onto the floor.

19

To recover, Laura had spent the previous day resting, reading, writing and buying food to cook for her friends. Vincent had phoned to say that the inspector could not come until Thursday. In the evening, after Rudi's call and dinner, they'd talked on the terrace, exchanging souvenirs, plans and other more mundane matters.

By the time Laura woke up on Thursday morning, her friends were already gone to work. Like the day before, Eugenie had prepared a breakfast tray. Fresh croissants and jam were waiting for Laura on the kitchen table, alongside a note stating Eugenie would be back at 6 pm.

After breakfast, Laura waited until ten to dial Derek's number. He answered after several rings, just as she was about to hang up. His voice was raspy. She must have woken him. When she said she was in Paris and wanted to pay him a visit, he wasn't too keen and asked when.

Laura told him it could be another day if it suited him better. "No, no, Laura," he replied, "it's just that I went to bed at about 5 in the morning. I need some sleep." They agreed that Laura would visit at 4 pm.

There wasn't much to do until the afternoon, so she went for a walk. Paris is a beautiful city and she loved wandering the streets with no particular destination in mind. When she reached the Seine, she walked along the right bank towards the Place de la Concorde.

As she passed a kiosk on the edge of the vast square, she stopped dead in her tracks. She rarely paid attention to the news when walking, but all the newspapers were showing the same huge photograph.

Bold headlines proclaimed: "Gruesome Murder in Paris", "Beheaded in Bed", "Horrific Crime in the 7th Arrondissement". She looked closer and couldn't believe it. It was the photo of Benito Esposito, the Mafia boss she had seen in Monaco! Only he wasn't the killer. He was the victim!

As Parisian newspapers all go to press at different times, Laura asked for the latest. The woman at the kiosk said they were all special editions, delivered ten minutes ago.

The information was practically the same in all the papers. Esposito's personal assistant found him. He had a key to the house. When Esposito wasn't in his study as usual, he went to look for him in his private quarters and found the half-naked body in the bedroom. Esposito's head, neatly severed, lay on the floor. There was a lot of blood in the room. The murder weapon, a sword, was sticking out of the bed next to what was left of his neck.

According to the police, the murder took place between midnight and 1 am. More information would come in the next issue. The photo was recent and showed Esposito in an elegant costume, probably at a fancy reception.

Laura couldn't believe what she was seeing. The killing of a Mafia boss wouldn't bother her. It's what you'd expect from gangsters, and the Mafia was known for its inventive methods of punishment. But they killed Esposito five days after she'd

seen him in Monaco. Three days after he'd tried to kill her! Was there a connection? What was going on?

Impulsively, she considered going to the police, but then she thought it would be better to talk to Vincent's friend, the inspector, first. Right away. He might be busy at the moment, but her information could be valuable in the murder case.

She called Eugenie from the phone booth next to her bench. When she answered, Laura told her where she was and what she had just read about the murder in the seventh arrondissement.

"They published a photo and the name of the victim, Eugenie. That's the Mafia boss I saw in Monaco, the one who tried to kill me on Sunday! There could be a connection. How can I contact Vincent's tennis partner, the inspector? I need to speak to him as soon as possible."

"I will call Vincent immediately, Laura. The best thing would be to go back to our flat. We have a phone and you'll be safe there."

Laura hung up, hailed a taxi, and returned to the apartment in Rue Bénouville. The inspector arrived twenty minutes later.

"Ms Heyns? I'm Jules Sébille, inspector of the Paris police and Vincent's tennis partner," he said with a smile, showing her his ID.

She invited him into the kitchen and offered him a cup of coffee. "Mr Sébille, what I am about to tell you may seem a little... unusual. But it may have something to do with the murder discovered this morning."

“Testimonies in murder cases are generally unusual, fortunately so,” replied the inspector. ”According to Vincent, you knew the victim.”

"I have to start with another murder if you want to understand my role," she replied. "There is probably a connection between the two."

While the inspector took notes, she told him all the details of Gastoun's murder, Eisabello's request for her help with the investigation, her kidnapping and escape, and why she had come to Paris.

When she had finished, he looked at her. "Well... that does indeed sound very peculiar. The term is appropriate. I need to ask you some questions to get a better picture. May I start by asking you what you've been doing since 8 pm yesterday?"

Laura couldn't believe it. Did he think she had killed the Mafia boss? She asked him, and he tried to reassure her. "Ms Heyns. This is standard procedure. We have just begun our investigation. Unfortunately, I have to ask you this question and if it’s some consolation, at this moment everyone in Paris without an alibi is a potential suspect."

When she still looked at him indignantly, he added: "According to what you just told me, you even had a motive to kill Benito Esposito. You felt threatened by him. Now, the circumstances of his murder are peculiar and would already clear you, but that doesn’t discharge me from asking you this unpleasant question."

Although she thought it absurd, even from his point of view, she complied and explained. "I was here, in this apartment,

with Vincent and Eugenie. We had dinner at eight and talked on the terrace until about eleven. Then I went to bed. This morning, I slept until well after eight, had a coffee and went for a walk. That's when I read about the Mafia boss's murder."

"As far as we know, Benito Esposito was not a Mafia boss, Ms Heyns. We have no information that he had any dealings with any branch of any known Mafia. You said that on Friday night, during the art auction, Esposito spoke to one of the two gangsters who kidnapped you two days later. Are you sure it was the same man he talked to?"

"I am. Wait a minute," she said and went to her room to get the drawings. Back in the kitchen, she explained as she spread the drawings out on the table in front of him. "I did these drawings from memory on Monday. This is Esposito. He sat in front of me all night at the art auction, so the drawing is pretty accurate. And these are the two killers. I would say that the sketches are also quite accurate. "

She put the two drawings of the killers on top of Esposito's, in front of Inspector Sébille. "This one delivered the message that lured Gastoun Giraud to the shed where he was murdered. Together with the brown-bearded man here, they both followed Solange Giraud and me to Saint Paul de Vence. On Friday night, they were both in the lobby of the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, where the art auction was taking place. The redhead spoke to Esposito that night. They both kidnapped me on Sunday, pretending to take me to their boss. Then they took me straight out to sea."

"Yes, you told me. Quite far out. You must be an exceptional swimmer. And you are an excellent sketcher. If you are looking for work..." He left that hanging.

Laura returned to the murdered man. "You insisted that Mr Esposito had no involvement with the Mafia. In that case, can you explain his relationship with the two killers involved in Gastoun's murder and my kidnapping? He obviously had a connection with the gangsters since he spoke to one of them so familiarly. And they said that their boss wanted to talk to me, so the boss knew me. Mr Sébille, in general I'm not that well known in criminal circles."

He said he'd look into it. "But talking to a criminal doesn't mean you're one of them. Esposito may have ignored the redhead's criminal activities." A real tongue in cheek, like all cops, Laura thought.

She tried another angle. "From the little I read in the newspapers, Esposito's murder has some similarities with the murder of Gastoun Giraud. Gastoun was hanged alive, which means it would have taken at least two powerful men to murder him. The same goes for Esposito. More than one person killed him. At least two, probably three. Two to hold him down and one to cut off his head. Gastoun's killers had erased all evidence. I am sure you will find the same pattern in this case: a total lack of traces."

The inspector looked at her, both eyebrows raised. "You're a woman of many talents, Ms Heyns. But that's not the way we work. Before we speculate about the circumstances, we gather as many facts as possible. The investigation started only four hours ago, and I'm not at liberty to reveal anything about it yet."

"Inspector," she began, "I only got involved in this mess in order to convince the police to reopen the case of Mr Giraud's murder. But now my primary concern is to make sure that you catch the killers before they catch me. So what do you suggest I do?"

The inspector looked at her thoughtfully. "Let me make a few phone calls and I'll tell you. Where is the phone?" she pointed to the hall. He went there, closing the kitchen door behind him.

After a few minutes, he returned. "OK. Vincent said his wife went to bed right after you, while he worked on some project until one in the morning. He's sure you haven't left the apartment. But from what you've told me, you're now a crucial witness. Unfortunately, I must ask you not to leave Paris without telling us. As you can imagine, we don't have the resources to provide you with a bodyguard. And it won't be necessary if you stay here in the apartment as much as possible. You'll be safe. However, I would like you to sign a statement about the kidnapping and attempted murder. I have asked a colleague to take your testimony and have you sign it in her presence."

Great, she thought, all they can offer me is house arrest. She wondered if she should mention Derek and their meeting this afternoon, but decided against it. There was no need to get Derek into trouble. If the police were to snoop around his workshop, they would surely discover his forgeries and he would return to the place he left less than a year ago.

"What about Gastoun Giraud's murder?" she asked. "That's what got me into this mess. Are you going to reopen the case?"

The inspector looked a little embarrassed. "I can't decide that. The Giraud case seems to be more related to your kidnapping on the French Riviera. I would expect the local police to reopen the case after your testimony. If they confirm that Mr Giraud was murdered and there is evidence that the two murders are connected, we will combine the investigations."

He rose to his feet. "Your drawings are very useful. I'll take them. I will give colour copies to my colleague Jacqueline Leroy, who will take your statement on the kidnapping and attempted murder. She will fax it to our colleagues on the Côte d'Azur. We'll also prepare search warrants for the two men."

So she's a woman. Maybe she'll have a more flexible mind, Laura thought. "Do you think she can come early? I have an appointment at four."

He was already on his way out and turned around on the threshold of the door: "You shouldn't leave the flat. It's for your own safety. But Jacqueline will be here any minute. Thank you for contacting me. You did the right thing. Now stay safe. You have been taking a lot of risks lately. So far, you have been lucky. Don't count on it. It would be a shame to lose such an excellent swimmer."

"Thank you for your concern and guidance," she quipped, opening the door for him.

Jacqueline Leroy arrived less than half an hour later. She was worse than Sébille in her own way: a young, procedural civil servant. She had brought a portable typewriter with her and

refused the offer of coffee. Despite the afternoon heat, she even refused a glass of water.

While typing Laura's statement, the officer frequently interrupted her with reproachful questions and remarks that seemed more rhetorical than helpful. How could she imagine exposing and tracking down murderers? Why didn't she report the kidnapping in Nice on Sunday night? Why did she come to Paris? And so on.

When she finished typing Laura's statement, she read out what she'd written and, after making the few corrections Laura had asked for, she had Laura sign it. She said she'd send Laura a copy, repeated her colleague's advice to stay in the flat and left without so much as a smile for almost an hour.

The clock in the kitchen read three twenty.

Laura wasn't entirely convinced that Esposito was an innocent victim. To get a better idea, she needed to see Derek and ask him if he knew the guy, or if he had ever heard anything about the Mafia buying art.

She called a taxi and quickly changed into jeans and a T-shirt. The taxi was waiting when she stepped out into the street. She gave Derek's address, 14 Rue Perronet, Paris 6e. It was only mid-afternoon, but the major boulevards were already jammed. The driver knew his way around the city and drove quickly through the narrow streets. After about twenty minutes, he stopped in a small street. She asked him what time it was. He said it was 3:58 pm.

The front door was open. Above the dozen doorbells was a copper plaque that read 'Derek Morton - Fine Arts'. Inside,

taped to a letterbox, was another sign in white plastic: 'Derek Morton - staircase end of corridor - 6th floor'.

No lift. She took the rather large stairs. The last part of the staircase to the sixth floor was smaller and led to a door with Derek's name on it.

She saw no bell, so she knocked. As no one answered, she tried the handle. The door opened into a very large, bright room. When she called Derek's name, there was still no answer. Closing the door behind her, she entered the loft. This was obviously where Derek lived and worked.

The loft was about eight by ten and five metres high, with an old wooden floor. There were raised galleries on two sides. Opposite the entrance, below the left gallery, she saw well-furnished bookshelves built around two doors. At the back of the loft, near the bookshelves on her left, there was a large sofa next to three large armchairs and a low table.

Four tall, wide windows in front of her provided a stunning view of the rooftops. As she approached, she noticed Notre Dame Cathedral's upper half in the background to the right. The lower section of the left window was open, allowing fresh air to come in.

Most of the space was clearly dedicated to work. Two large tables were filled with containers of paint, powder, brushes, pots, and various other painting materials. On three easels near the windows, there were what seemed to be genuine paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso, and Gauguin. She saw other paintings by famous artists on the walls and assumed that Derek had more on the shelves in the galleries.

Assuming that he would have no objection to her looking at the paintings while she awaited his arrival, Laura was about to examine them when a door opened behind her. She turned round.

"Right on time," Solange said. "Have a seat, Laura."

She pointed a gun at her.

20

For a moment Laura was completely confused and did not know what to think or do.

"Solange? Where is Derek? What are you doing here? Why are you aiming that thing at me? Is this some perverse joke?"

"Oh come on Laura. I don't play those stupid games. Unfortunately, I have to greet you alone. Antonio and Frederico were supposed to be here, but they haven't come back yet. Well, make yourself comfortable. Who knows how long they'll take."

When she did not comply, Solange's voice became angry. "Laura, sit down, damn it. Over there, in that chair." She pointed the gun at the three armchairs standing close to the wall at the back.

Lost in a daze, Laura followed, thoughts clashing in her head. "Can you tell me what you're doing here?" she asked. "I was hoping to see Derek. And who on earth are Antonio and Frederico?"

Solange's mouth smiled, but her eyes were cold as she looked at Laura. "Did they not properly introduce themselves on Sunday? Their manners need improvement. They invited you on a boat trip, but you skipped the party."

That was a blow. The two killers were working for Solange! In that case, nothing made sense. "I don't understand, Solange. Did you want to kill me? But why? Why hire me only to kill me a few days later? Did you kill your uncle? Without the gun, this

would just be a terrible joke. Can you tell me what's going on? Please put the gun down. These things go off by accident."

Solange sat down in a chair and lowered the gun, still holding it in her right hand. With her left, she pulled a cigarette from a packet lying next to a glass half full of a yellow liquid, probably whisky. "No problem. I can tell you the complete story. We'll have plenty of time. It could be useful for me, things have been hectic lately. I need to reassess the situation. You can serve as my temporary sounding board. You'll be dead in less than an hour, but for now you'll listen."

She lit a cigarette and took a sip of whisky. Laura was terrified. Despite her calm demeanour, this person seemed very different from the Solange she knew, as if some evil spirit had possessed her. She feverishly thought of a way to escape before the killers arrived.

Laura's mind was still racing when Solange's deep voice caught her attention. "It all started in 1972 when I got the job as assistant to the director of the Ricard Foundation’s gallery here in Paris. Imagine, Solange from the backwater village of Tourrettes sur Loup getting such a prestigious job in Paris! I was ecstatic. My contract promised a decent salary and a 10% bonus on the sale of expensive paintings."

"I had several university degrees, a vast knowledge of art history and was successful at selling. Unfortunately, the bonuses existed only on paper. Every time I made a sale, the gallery manager somehow collected the bonus instead of me. It took me a couple of years to get rid of him. I had proof that he and Jean Ricard were having an intimate relationship. Since homosexuality is still illegal in France, Ricard preferred to

sacrifice him. After intense discussions between us, he gave me the job. That was in '74."

Solange blew out a cloud of smoke and took a sip of whisky, then continued.

"I thought I'd made it. At 32, I was the director of one of the most prestigious galleries in Paris. I moved into a five-room apartment on the Rue de Rivoli and began a lavish lifestyle among the Parisian jet set. It was far beyond my financial means, but I did my best to compensate. When people paid cash at the gallery, I took more and more money for myself. But people didn't pay cash often enough. Despite all the hype about famous painters, I just couldn't make enough money to cover my expenses." She looked at Laura as if expecting sympathy or understanding.

"Fortunately, I met Derek Morton during a Van Gogh retrospective at the Musée d'Orsay. I knew him from Tourrettes, but I didn't know he was an art forger. Derek is a vain narcissist and a blowhard. When I told him I was the director of the Ricard Gallery, he had to show off his expertise. He showed me two Van Goghs in the retrospective that were forgeries. They looked authentic, so I asked him how he knew. He mentioned that David Rosengard, a famous art collector, had recently bought the paintings at Christie's in London and lent them to the museum. Christie’s had sold the paintings for Andrew Coleman, an internationally respected art dealer whom I knew well. Derek told me that Coleman sold most of his forgeries."

Solange feigned a laugh. "I didn't believe a word of it. Can you imagine? This yokel, Derek Morton, claiming to have painted the two Van Goghs hanging in front of me, exhibited in

a Van Gogh retrospective at the Musée du Quai d'Orsay, and accusing a famous dealer of selling his forgeries? Back in my office, I rang Coleman, who didn't tell me he'd got the paintings from Derek, but he confirmed all the names and dates."

She took a long drag on her cigarette and looked at Laura in amazement.

"I went back to see Derek Morton in his miserable studio in Vincennes. He showed me other Van Goghs he had painted. I saw several paintings by Picasso, Matisse, Monet, Dali, etc. An incredible collection of what looked like original paintings. He also painted a Picasso in front of me. Technically he is brilliant. He has an excellent knowledge of the materials used by these painters, the way they worked and composed their paintings. He even has a keen sense of the emotional limits of each artist and is always very careful to use the right canvases, pigments, solvents, brushes, etc. He has also mastered several effective techniques for ageing paintings. International art experts have authenticated his forgeries!"

Solange shook her head, as if she still couldn't believe it.

"I bought some paintings that day and asked him to deliver them to my private apartment. Picasso was in demand, but I started selling Matisse and Monet. Not in the gallery, that's not the kind of paintings we sell at the Foundation. But I knew who wanted what. They trusted me because of my position in the Paris art market. I told them it was a confidential sale from someone who didn't want to be on the record. You can't imagine what greedy people will swallow."

Solange got up to refill her glass. When Laura moved in her chair to change the position of her legs, Solange swung around and pointed the gun at her. She relaxed when she saw that Laura was still sitting, returned to her chair with a half-full glass and continued.

" With my position in the art market, my personal relationships with the wealthiest collectors and Derek's talent, our success was assured. We soon 'found previously unknown works' by classical painters in 'unexpected locations'. It was a time we had real fun." She smiled at the memory of those early days.

"It was much easier to sell the forgeries than the paintings in the gallery. My biggest sale was in 1976, when I sold three Picassos and a Van Gogh for eighteen million dollars to an Italian industrialist and famous art collector. I skilfully arranged the paperwork by forging the signature of the deputy director of the Ricard Foundation in Saint Paul. Officially, he had signed the sale and deposited the money into a numbered account in Switzerland. I later transferred the money to a Panamanian investment fund." Then she added with a smirk, "For my retirement."

She took a moment to consider what she'd said and then continued. "Right after that, I had a second stroke of luck when I found this loft in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. I bought it for Derek, because I knew he dreamed of having a workshop in this area of the sixth arrondissement. Derek values glitter more than money. I offered him a deal. If he signed a ten-year contract to work only for me, I'd pay him a good salary and at the end of the contract, he'd be the owner of the workshop. He accepted."

Solange smiled, probably thinking of her successful past, then stood up and paced the room in front of Laura.

"Unfortunately, just before all the paperwork for the loft was ready, he had done this stupid penny-ante forgery of César's work sketches. César made a public scandal and Derek went to jail. Before I knew it, the police raided his workshop in Vincennes, where all the paintings were stored. With my Panamanian money frozen for ten years, I ran out of steam."

She sat down again, took a sip of whisky and pulled a fresh cigarette from her packet.

"My financial needs were rapidly depleting my reserves. I was becoming increasingly desperate as my debts piled up. Derek still had a few months to go, and once he was out of prison, it would be some time before we got back up to speed. I had to find a way out."

"Fortunately, an Italian promoter was interested in our land in Tourrettes sur Loup. Given its size and strategic location, they offered a large amount, about as much as I needed. I persuaded my mother to sell, but that cretin Gastoun was against it. He wanted to keep the land. For me! I told him I didn't need land, I needed money! That people owed me a lot of money and that I would go bankrupt if I didn't get some money quickly. But I couldn't convince him. He said he would talk to my debtors."

Solange became increasingly agitated. She got up again and started walking, then stopped and turned to Laura.

"I really need the money, do you understand? It has to come quickly! Otherwise, I will have to leave my apartment in Rue de Rivoli, sell the one in Vence, or worse, perhaps even this loft

that is part of Derek's contract! My entire world would collapse! I didn't see any other way than to get rid of the only obstacle to the sale: Gastoun."

"An Italian friend helped me find two hitmen, Antonio and Frederico. They posed as my 'debtors' and arranged a meeting with Gastoun. I asked them to make it look like suicide, to hang him like in Goya's painting. They're professionals. Even the police believed it. Only I didn't expect my mother to go mad."

"To make matters worse, at the end of last year, Benito Esposito wanted to sell the paintings he'd bought from me, and Sotheby's refused. Two of their experts disputed the authenticity of the paintings because they had checked the fake histories of ownership. I admit they were a bit light, we had got careless. In short, Esposito wanted his money back. Esposito wanted his money back. Since all the paperwork pointed to the deputy director, Ricard fired him. But it could still turn out to be a huge scandal for the foundation. So when I promised to take care of Esposito, I got the job."

" I thought I could control him with vague promises, but a few weeks ago Esposito went to Ricard and told him that he suspected me of being behind the deal. Last week Ricard confronted me and accused me of being an accomplice, perhaps even responsible for the transaction. He refused to formalise the sale. Had he done so and simply blamed the former assistant manager, we could have taken the matter to court. His refusal sealed the fate of both men."

Solange turned to Laura. "Then I made my biggest mistake. To appease my mother, I hired you. A lousy choice. I misjudged you. You could have enjoyed the 500 francs a day job for

months, stretched it out, and made as much money as possible. But no, you did the stupidest thing: you took it seriously. In less than a week, you caught the scent. When you arrived at the Foundation sneaking around, I thought it was time to stop you. We put you on the boat and took you out to sea. They should have questioned you to find out who knew what, even if it meant torturing you if necessary. But that idiot Antonio let you escape."

"When you jumped overboard and they didn't see you anymore, they were convinced that you had drowned. Even if you hadn't, they were so far from the shore that you couldn't come back. I still don't know how you did it. Just out of curiosity, could you tell me?" Sitting down, she stared at Laura with a puzzled expression.

Laura replied with a straight face, "I swam."

Her honest answer seemed to upset Solange. She stood up. "Are you still joking, Laura? I don't think you're fully aware of your situation. You should know that you're going to end up here, in this loft. Your blood will be used to create a masterpiece. Not an allegory, it will be a real Jackson Pollock."

Solange began pacing up and down in front of Laura, checking periodically to see if she was listening. "Esposito got impatient and threatened to press charges. There was no way I could raise that much money when I was still up to my neck in debt. He had to be silenced." Solange looked at Laura as if she were expecting her agreement.

"Esposito was a very elusive man. He was difficult to catch. Our first attempt was in Monaco. We knew he'd be there for the

art auction. We invited him aboard a yacht we'd chartered and anchored in the port of Monaco under the pretext of giving him a large share of the money. But he didn't turn up that night. After that, we had trouble finding him."

"On Monday, I found out that he was on a flight from Rome to Paris. We took the first flight on Tuesday and went to see him at his estate last night. This time I went too. He had tried to ruin my life. He'd really pissed me off. I hated him and wanted to make sure he ended up like Holofernes in Artemisia Gentileschi's painting. I've always loved that painting."

Solange sat down, picked up her glass and emptied it. Then she lit another cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke and looked at Laura.

"My relationship with Jean Ricard had always been, let's say, strained. Ricard had asked for an audit of the gallery's accounts from 1975 to 77 and found serious inconsistencies. He asked me to resign, in which case he wouldn't press charges."

"In any case, I didn't see how I could continue to work for the Foundation. Since I could make a living with Derek, I was tempted to accept Ricard's offer. But I don't trust him, he wouldn't stop there. Once he got rid of me, he'd take revenge for all the years he'd been at my mercy. He has to go too. By chance, he's in Paris at the moment."

"Jean Ricard is weak. My men will have no difficulty in persuading him to write a letter accusing himself of Esposito's murder, a crime of passion. After that, he'll commit suicide. Although he has nothing in common with Marat, Ricard will end up like him, in his bathtub, with the letter in his hand. You know

the painting by Jacques-Louis David, don't you? Well, that should be settled by now. But it's taking longer than we thought. I should have gone with them, but I had to be here for you, otherwise you'd disappear again."

Solange became increasingly agitated as she recounted her descent into madness. Nothing had gone according to plan. She had lost control. She rose and stood before her hostage. "I never killed for pleasure, Laura, believe me. I just wanted to live my life." She turned briefly to look at the phone, then back at Laura.

"Stay in your chair. If you get up, I will shoot you in the leg. I won't kill you, but it will hurt a lot." She walked to the phone.

Just then it rang. Her nerves on edge, Solange jumped. Holding the gun in her right hand, she hastily grabbed the phone with her left. It slipped from her grasp. As Solange tried to catch it, Laura seized her chance. She jumped to her feet and ran to the nearest door and got inside.

It was the bathroom.

21

Solange fired. The bullet went through the door and hit the wall opposite. Laura looked around quickly, grabbed a broomstick and jammed it behind the door handle. Then she pushed a chest of drawers against the door and used a bucket to block the handle and hold the broomstick in place.

Solange fired another bullet, this one going straight through the middle of the door at chest height. "Don't be a fool, Laura. You're on the sixth floor. There is no way you can escape. You're just going to make me really angry."

The window was high above the toilet, in an alcove. Standing on the toilet bowl, Laura could just reach the bottom of the window frame with her fingertips. The toilet alcove was about a metre wide. She put her feet against one wall and her back against the other. By pushing her back up with her hands under her body, then her feet a little higher, she could slowly move up. Her hands...

Another bullet. This one broke some glass in the chest of drawers, ricocheted off the iron bathtub and hit the toilet. Laura pushed herself higher. It was an enormous effort, but her life was at stake. The adrenaline made her forget all her weaknesses. When she was high enough to reach the window handle, she opened it.

Now came the hardest part. She used her feet and back to stay in place, grabbed the frame with both hands and got her right elbow on the outside. At the same time she used both feet to push against the wall and rolled her body over the edge. It worked!

She pulled herself further out. The ledge in front of the window was only fifty centimetres wide. Hanging halfway over it, she looked down at the courtyard twenty-five metres below. She knelt on the ledge, then stood up and tried to hold on to a tube that ran along the building. It was shaking, but it held. Carefully she moved sideways along the ledge, trying not to look down and keeping her body in line, holding on to anything that seemed solid, like protrusions, cables, hooks... she made her way to the nearest edge of the building.

As she looked around the edge, her heart sank. It was the side with the big windows. She cursed herself. A little spatial awareness would have saved her the unnecessary walk. But what now? There was a large rainwater pipe running along the edge of the building. She rattled it, but it seemed solid, with brackets every fifty centimetres. There was enough room to put a foot on the bracket between the pipe and the wall. She grabbed a bracket with her right hand and moved away from the wall to look down. Each level had a ledge. There was no way down, only up. She had to climb five metres using the downpipe brackets. There was no other way.

To climb up was easy compared to what she'd done before. About two metres below the top, zinc sheets covered the wall, still warm from the sun. She crawled over the edge. The roof had a 30-degree slope, also covered with zinc, like most Parisian buildings.

As she lay there, trying to catch her breath, she heard a loud commotion in the room below. The open window was around the corner she'd climbed, just below where she was lying. She heard shouting and fighting. Things were being thrown about.

Then Solange began to scream hysterically. Laura crawled to the edge of the roof, hoping to hear better what was going on below.

Just as she stretched her head over the edge, she saw Solange fly out of the window and land with a thud in the courtyard below. Laura must have let out a yelp because the redhead, who'd been looking out of the window to watch Solange fall, suddenly turned and looked up at Laura. His head quickly retreated.

Laura jumped to her feet and looked around. Then she ran across the roof, jumped onto a neighbouring house, and the next, and the next, until she was stopped by a high wall of chimneys that blocked her passage from one edge of the roof to the other.

She rushed up the iron rings that served as steps. There were no steps down on the other side. It was far too high to jump without risking injury. She had to go down the way she had come. The only passage around this wall was along the edge of the roof.

As she turned, she saw the bearded gangster sticking his head out of a small skylight three houses away. He saw her too and fired. The bullets hit the chimney wall, sending shards of stone flying into her face.

At the edge of the roof, Laura grabbed an iron bar running vertically up the wall with her right hand and used her momentum to get her foot to the other side, while her left hand reached around the wall, hoping to find a similar vertical bar. She grabbed the bar on the other side and pulled with all the

strength of her left arm, releasing her right at the same time. For a split second, she was suspended twenty-five metres above the ground. But the powerful pull gave her enough momentum to shift her weight to the other side, where she fell onto the roof.

Rest meant death. She got up, sprinted across the 30-degree pitch of the roof and climbed onto the next and the next, each a little higher or lower than the one before. Fortunately, the chimney walls that separated those roofs didn't run from one end to the other. When she heard shots and bullets hitting the zinc, she took cover behind one of the walls and peered between the round chimney pipes to locate her pursuers.

The redhead was kneeling on the high chimney wall. He had fired. The bearded one was trying to get around the wall the same way she was. It was risky to wait and watch, but she was spellbound. If he got there, she would be lost.

He didn't. As he swung his body around the thick wall, his left hand missed the bar on the other side. Unable to find any hold on the wall, his body slipped back over the void. With a terrible scream, he fell to the street below.

The redhead cursed, emptied his gun in her direction and climbed down. He didn't even try to follow. She was safe for the moment.

As she sat down, her whole body shaking, she suddenly heard sirens from all sides. A moment later, a megaphone called out: "Police! Stay in your flat, away from the windows! Don't come out!" Then shouts, gunshots, and silence again.

Unsure what to do, Laura waited until she saw several policemen on the roof above Derek’s loft, six or seven houses away. She recognised Inspector Sébille among them.

Waving her arms, she shouted at the top of her lungs: "Inspector Sébille! I'm Laura Heyns! Up here on the roof!"

22

If it hadn't been for the police, Laura wouldn't have had the courage to come down from the roof. A police officer came through a nearby dormer window and escorted her to the inspector.

Despite the warm evening, her teeth chattered and her whole body shook for almost an hour. The inspector took her to his nearby office at 36, quai des Orfèvres, the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department in Paris.

After the initial debriefing, he went back to the scene, leaving her with a policewoman and some tea. He returned to her at 8.30pm, switched on a tape recorder and asked Laura to repeat her explanations of what she was doing there, all the details of Solange's confession and her own escape over the rooftops. Laura was eager to talk and he had very few questions after that. When they'd finished, Inspector Sébille switched off the recorder.

"Several neighbours had called us when they heard the shots and then the screams," he explained. "When we arrived less than fifteen minutes later, we saw the man lying in the street and then found the woman's body in the courtyard. They were both dead."

For a moment he seemed lost in thought, then he continued. "I was strangely moved when I saw Ms Giraud. She was lying on her stomach, her left arm twisted and her right outstretched, a pool of blood under her head. I tell you these details because the scene in the courtyard reminded me of a painting I'd seen last summer in the National Gallery in Prague. Right down to

the group of people standing around the body in the narrow courtyard. I had a sense of déjà vu. It was the real-life reproduction of Schikaneder's painting 'Murder in the House'. This seems even stranger after your account of Ms Giraud's confession. I mean, her obsession with staging the murders like scenes from famous paintings."

"Including mine," Laura said. " The way I understood her remarks, her plan was to open up my veins and use my blood to create a Jackson Pollock! After that, nothing could frighten me. I had to escape, whatever the cost."

The inspector shook his head. "I'm no medical expert, but I think Ms Giraud lost it completely. Her whole world collapsed. The overwhelming pressure and lack of options caused a psychotic meltdown. She probably realised that she was approaching the abyss".

He seemed thoughtful for a moment, or perhaps tired. "Anyway, she's dead. We need someone to officially identify her body. Is there any family in Paris?"

"I only know her mother," Laura replied. "She lives on the Côte d'Azur. But there is Derek Morton. He's the one who lives in the loft. Where is he?"

Sébille shrugged. "We haven't seen Mr Morton and we'll be issuing a search warrant. You could identify the body, but I warn you, the face is a bloody mess. Otherwise, I'll call Ms Giraud's mother."

"I would have preferred to spare her this ordeal," Laura replied, "but she would anyway insist on seeing Solange to

make sure it's really her. If you agree, I will speak to her. You can listen in."

Inspector Sébille took the phone, activated the speaker, pressed nine for an outside line, and handed it to her. Laura dialled Eisabello's number.

She answered almost immediately, as if she had been expecting the call. "Laura? What is it? Where are you? Has something happened to you or Solange?"

"I'm in Paris. I'm so sorry, Eisabello, something terrible has happened. Solange is dead. She died this afternoon."

There was silence. Laura looked at the inspector, thinking they'd been cut off. He shrugged and motioned for her to wait, to give Eisabello time to absorb the painful information.

After almost a minute, Laura asked, "Eisabello? Can you come to Paris right away?"

There was a faint sob. Laura thought Eisabello was holding the phone in her lap and was crying. After another long moment, just as she was about to ask her question again, Eisabello blew her nose and replied.

"I am sorry, Laura. I expected an end like this, but I prayed it wouldn't happen. She was such a troublesome child. Such a brilliant but difficult child. Yes, I will come. I'll be on the next plane. I have to make some arrangements. Where can I reach you?”

Inspector Sébille wrote a telephone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Laura. She read the number out to Eisabello. "This is Inspector Sébille's phone. He needs to talk to

you and will tell you what happened and where Solange's body is."

Then she gave her Eugenie's number and told her to call her after talking to the police. They said goodbye and hung up.

Laura had a lot of questions for Sébille. "I really wonder where Derek Morton is. We agreed to meet at the loft at 4 pm. I can't picture him collaborating with Solange to set me up. I'm also wondering why her men killed Solange. And what about Jean Ricard? Solange ordered him dead as well. If I'm still alive, it's because her men were delayed."

Inspector Sébille shrugged his shoulders apologetically. "I cannot answer these questions, Ms Laura. I'm not allowed to comment on an ongoing investigation. But to tell the truth, we simply don't know enough at the moment. As for the murder of Ms Giraud, the bearded man is dead, and a colleague had to shoot the redhead in self-defence. He's badly wounded. Jacqueline tried to get him to talk. He just said, 'She was looking for it, that bitch,' and then he fainted. We'll have to patch him up before we can question him. But I don't have high hopes. Usually, these killers never talk. They prefer longer sentences. It's part of their culture. If they talk to the police, they lose their reputation and sometimes even their lives. At the very least, they'll never get another job."

"But Ricard is fine," he continued. "I can tell you that much. On his way home, he read the special editions with the news of Esposito's murder. He realised that his own life was now in grave danger. Instead of returning to his apartment, he stayed in a hotel and contacted us."

"Does that mean you don't know what happened, why the two killers were delayed?" she asked.

Sébille smiled. "Off the record, I'd say the two killers were waiting for him at his apartment. When he didn't show up, they finally returned to the loft to tell Ms Giraud. Meanwhile, she had let you escape and was on edge. They blamed each other for the growing chaos. Ms Giraud got very agitated. Perhaps she waved her gun around and they wrestled it from her. But even if she hadn't, these two professionals knew their job had become a complete mess. Ms Giraud was finished. Worse, she'd become a liability to them. It was in their interest to silence her. They decided to make it look like a suicide by throwing her out of the window."

"If the surviving gangster won't speak, only my testimony will establish responsibility," she said.

Inspector Sébille nodded. "So far, you are indeed the key witness, Ms Laura. Unfortunately, I must order you to remain in Paris until further notice. Until we know whether others are involved, I'd advise you to be careful. Although all perpetrators we know of have been neutralised, our investigation is only just beginning. Don't worry, we'll be able to gather more testimonies and enough evidence to put the surviving gangster away for the rest of his life."

He stretched. "Let's call it a day. I'll take you back to your friends. It's on my way home. They already know you're with us and will be back later tonight."

Inspector Sébille stopped in front of the Malaysian Embassy and turned to Laura. "I don't know if it's wise to thank people

for their recklessness, but I should thank you. If you hadn't got involved, things could have been a lot worse. Ms Giraud seems to have been a very intelligent person, ruthless, organised and completely lacking in empathy. Had you not been on her tail, she would have been under far less pressure. She would certainly have killed Jean Ricard. And others."

Laura turned to face him. "Perhaps one day, with more time and hindsight, you'll be able to explain to me at what moment my behaviour was as reckless as you seem to think it was. And what you think I should have done instead. Don't tell me I should have left it to the police. Because if the police had acted and done their job, I would have been picking violets in the fields above the village of Tourrettes sur Loup. Believe me, I'd have had a lot more fun doing that than climbing the rooftops of Paris to escape a deranged, murderous woman and a bunch of killers."

He looked at her for a moment, nodded and said, "See you soon." Laura wished him good night.

Eugenie and Vincent were wonderful. They were genuinely relieved to see her. Apart from the fatigue and the scratches on her arms and legs, Laura was in pretty good shape. Eugenie told her that Rudi had phoned. She didn't tell him anything about the day, just that Laura was at the police station and would be home later. Rudi had asked that she'd call him on her return. Eugenie suggested that she'd prepare a relaxing bath for Laura while she called Rudi.

When Laura dialled David's number, Rudi answered on the first ring. "Laura? What's wrong? Did you get into trouble? Are you all right?"

Laura had tears in her eyes when she heard his voice. The tension of the last few days, and especially that afternoon, had sent her emotions into overdrive. When she heard Rudi's voice, she felt a strange mixture of immense happiness, sensual longing, and sadness that he wasn't there to touch him. She told him what had happened during the day. As usual, Rudi listened without interrupting.

When she finished, he only said, "I'm coming, Laura. I can't take my car because Naomi needs it, but I'll find a way."

"Take my car," she said. They exchanged a few tender words, and he handed David to her.

Much later, after she had soaked in the tub for almost an hour, when she had settled into a deckchair on the terrace and Vincent had brought her a brandy, Laura told them about her day and her exchange with Sébille.

Eugenie looked at her wide-eyed. "Wow, what a terrible day! I have a feeling you have had enough of detective games. Do you think this Derek Morton called Solange Giraud to come and kill you?"

"I've thought about it myself," Laura admitted. "But I cannot imagine Solange confiding in someone like Derek, nor can I imagine Derek being part of such a murderous gang. I also don't think she killed him because he was the only 'lifestyle insurance' she had left. He must have sensed the danger and is hiding somewhere. Maybe I'll see him when I'm allowed to return to Tourrettes. Speaking of which, Eugenie, my friend Rudi is coming tomorrow and I don't know how long the police will

keep us in Paris. Can you recommend a nice hotel that isn't too expensive?"

Eugenie frowned. "I put it down to your tiredness, Laura, otherwise I would be offended. You two will stay here with us as long as it takes. We have had no fun since you arrived. Now that this horror story is over, as soon as your love has arrived, it's time to celebrate life!"

Epilogue

The following afternoon, Laura met Eisabello. She had arrived by plane in the morning and had spoken to Inspector Sébille. As Solange had a large birthmark on her lower back, which Eisabello was able to describe before seeing the body, she didn't have to look at the mutilated face. After giving Sébille the address of the hotel where she was staying, she called Laura. They met near her hotel, in the small park of the Saint-Jacques tower, the starting point of the famous 'Pilgrim's Way to Santiago de Compostela'.

A couple of people were walking in the garden. They sat down on a bench, both lost in thought. Although Solange had twice tried to kill her, the tragedy of her life and death had touched Laura deeply. Solange had an exciting future ahead of her, given her beauty, intelligence, wealth and success. But she ended up destroying it all in a dark, destructive spiral. She rebelled against fate, in her case a rebellion against happiness. An inability to be happy with the abundance she had.

After a moment's silence, Eisabello spoke. "Inspector Sébille said that, based on Solange's confession, they will treat Gastoun's death as murder. Laura, you have completed the task I set you. Unfortunately, it didn't go as I had imagined, but that's not your fault."

"The inspector had explained what had happened," she continued. "He said that Solange had tried to kill you twice and almost succeeded. It will sink in later. Right now, I feel empty, Laura. I have lost my daughter. I have discovered that she was a terrible creature. She killed my brother and another innocent

man in the most horrific way, she tried to kill you twice and was planning other gruesome murders. My daughter..." She cried.

Unable to find the right words to comfort her, Laura didn't interrupt her and let her cry. It would take a while for her to come out of this dark place.

After a long moment, Eisabello blew her nose and spoke. "Sorry, I can cry when I'm alone. If it's all right with you, Laura, I'll pay you the money I owe you in Tourrettes. You will come back, won't you?"

"Yes, as soon as they let me travel, probably next week. Eisabello, don't think you're responsible for Solange's actions. But you need help. This year has been very difficult for you. No one can cope with such blows without professional help."

Eisabello asked if she could kiss her goodbye, and they both did.

It was the last sad moment of the week. When Eugenie said "celebrate life", she meant it. As soon as Rudi arrived, both she and her husband took a few days off, and they partied every night.

The first night they went to the brand-new discotheque "Le Palace" on the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre. It's a former theatre converted into a vast dance floor with grandiose decor, where the known and the unknown mingled.

The next night they went wild at the new club "Les Bains Douches" on Rue du Bourg L'Abbé, a favourite of the stars. It's been decorated by Philippe Starck, who had preserved the spirit

of the old public baths with basins, stoneware, and mosaic floors.

On the third night, Eugenie took them to "Le Sept", a small private club on Rue Saint-Anne. They met David Bowie, who was relaxing in Paris during his world tour.

After the tragic events, Laura needed to switch off. Dancing to exhaustion three nights in a row without a care in the world helped her regain her stability.

On Saturday, Laura received a call from Derek. He was still in London and had contacted David. She had told David to give him her number. The events he had read in a newspaper had left Derek shocked and seeking answers. He explained Solange had woken him at 1:30 am on Thursday morning when she turned up at the loft, covered in blood. She refused to explain and asked him to go to her apartment in the Rue de Rivoli to get some fresh clothes.

When he returned, it must have been 3 or 4 in the morning. Solange had already showered and was sleeping on the sofa. She must have overheard their conversation when Laura called him at ten in the morning.

Solange had asked him to leave, she needed the loft for the afternoon and would call Laura later to reschedule her visit for another day.

He had left to visit some friends and returned to the loft around 6 pm. When he saw several police cars and two police officers guarding the entrance to the house, he was convinced that they had discovered the forgeries and were looking for him

at the loft. He turned on his heels, borrowed some money from his friends, and left for London.

Laura asked him to call Inspector Sébille. "You should really consider coming back, Derek. Otherwise, you'll be on the run for the rest of your life. They're investigating murders, not your forgeries. I'm confident you'll be able to make a deal. You're an important witness in this murder case." He agreed to call Sébille.

The inspector called her on Monday for a final interview. He got Derek's call and allowed Laura to leave Paris as long as she left her contact details.

"And please don't repeat to anyone what I'm about to tell you now. You were right, Ms Laura. You got into this mess because the local police didn't do their job properly. I have been considering this case, your role in it, and the potential outcome for you. In the end, I feel we owe you an apology on behalf of our colleagues on the French Riviera. Please accept this small gift."

He handed her a neatly wrapped parcel. Laura looked at him in surprise. "What is it?"

He smiled. "Why don't you open it to find out?" The box contained a crumpled beige raincoat, similar to the one worn by 'Inspector Columbo'.

"It's been a pleasure knowing you, Ms Laura. Try to stay safe." He kissed her goodbye, French style.

A few days after their return to the Côte d'Azur, Eugenie told her on the phone that Derek Morton had returned to Paris. He was staying with friends for the time being. As Solange's properties had been sealed, Derek could only collect his personal belongings under Jacqueline Leroy's supervision.

Inspector Sébille told Vincent that Derek would be charged with producing and selling counterfeits, but could avoid prison if he cooperated fully with the murder investigation. Sébille will also put him in touch with the recently established OCBC police unit that investigates cultural crimes. His expertise in detecting forgeries and his knowledge of the shady side of the art market will be useful to them.

David, Rudi and Laura agreed not to tell anyone what had happened and let Eisabello decide what to disclose. Jean Ricard had invited her to the Foundation in Saint Paul to thank her for helping to save his life. He gave her a beautiful signed and numbered lithograph by Joan Miró. While they were talking on the terrace of his house, surrounded by the four German Shepherds, Laura told him she had initially suspected him of being involved in the crimes.

"I also suspected you, Ms Laura, in Monaco, when you refused to say your surname, and especially when I saw you snooping around here near my house. I was convinced that you were spying on me on Solange's behalf."

Obviously distressed, he looked at the tall trees in front of the terrace. "Mr Esposito had shared his suspicions about Solange with me. Solange was a brilliant but very dark personality. She could be funny and charismatic, had an encyclopaedic knowledge and was an excellent

conversationalist. She had fascinating stories to tell that made her look good, until you discovered, often by accident, that her stories were pure fiction. I understood her true nature too late. Promises, even contracts, meant nothing to her, rules were only suggestions to her, and laws were simple restrictions that held her back. She lied shamelessly to achieve her goals. She had no sense of norms or social standards, no awareness of risk, no guilt about the consequences of her actions and no empathy for anyone. People were things to her. She always got what she wanted by using people's emotions whenever they served her. Whether through a dramatic display of emotion or a brutal act of violence."

It was a textbook description of a psychopath. But his words were right on the mark, in line with what she had experienced, especially that last afternoon. Ricard had worked with Solange for six years and suffered her blackmail. He knew her very well.

Finally, Jean Ricard apologised for ending their conversation, but the Mayor of Saint Paul was waiting for him. He walked her to her car. carrying the framed engraving, and assured her she'd be invited to all their future vernissages.

Laura’s house warming party took place a week after their return. Patrick had completed the work earlier than expected. As soon as they found out the house was ready, Rudi wasted no time in moving in his furniture. Naomi allowed him to take a few household items with him. They put up two big notices in the bistros about the party and word of mouth did the rest.

It's safe to say that this little old village house has never seen so many visitors at once. Every floor was filled to capacity. The

party even spilled into the adjacent alleyways. Jacky and his jazz band set up in the lane next to the house.

All the artists and a few locals from Tourrettes had come. On the roof terrace of the house, David, Heinz and two of his girlfriends were grilling meat and vegetables on two large barbecues. They had many visitors who came to help carry the food or bring drinks for them. Leschoni, the baker behind the church, had made a special batch of his famous rye bread and five large trays of his equally famous pissaladière. Fred had organised a fund-raiser to buy several small barrels of wine. People were dancing in the alleys or talking in groups inside or outside the house.

Although Laura wanted to believe that it was just to welcome her in the village, Rudi explained that such extravagant celebrations were rather common in the artists' community of Tourrettes. This was simply an expression of their 'joie de vivre', their prevailing philosophy being that 'there is always a good reason to celebrate'. It could be someone's arrival or departure, the opening of a shop or an artist's vernissage, a holiday, or a birthday... or simply an invitation to a party. It all depends on who's inviting and what's going on. Some people might turn up unexpectedly, or not when they normally would.

Like Leslie, who didn't turn up that night, much to Laura's regret. She'd asked McCampbell to bring him along, so they could have a fresh start. But she wasn't sure the 'Scot' had even bothered to try.

Naomi dropped by with Miri and her new partner. Eugenie and Vincent couldn't make it, but promised to visit soon. Otherwise, Laura will see them when she's back in Paris for the

trial. Of course, Eisabello didn't come either. The day before, she had invited Laura for afternoon tea and paid her double what they had agreed.

Fred was the last guest to leave the house just before sunrise. After kissing both Laura's cheeks, he stood back and looked at her.

"Remember when you arrived a month ago?" Fred asked. "I told you this village was far too much fun. You didn't believe me then. Now tell me, have you been bored since?"

Laura burst out laughing. Her laughter lasted so long that both Fred and Rudi grew concerned, but she couldn't help it.

Finally, she caught her breath and wiped away the tears. Then she took Fred into her arms. "No, Fred. You were right. I haven't been bored a single moment since."

Gunther Hoser likes to tell stories, as his first book "Sketches of the Algarve" showed. "Murderous Masterpieces" is his first crime novel. Based on his own experiences of the time and place, he sets the story in the late 70s, between the French Riviera and Paris. I

It's the golden age of the French Riviera. The artistic bohemians still mingle with the jet set and the villages of the hinterland pulse with artistic creativity.

It's also the time when art becomes an international commodity, with all the perverse effects of an emerging market.

The apparent suicide of a resident in the quiet, picturesque village of Tourrettes sur Loup becomes the catalyst for an investigation that soon proves life-threatening. Unlike the brilliant detectives of the usual crime novels, the anti-hero of this story solves the series of crimes somewhat in spite of herself, unwittingly, through the sheer force of her virtues.

ISBN 9798308301332

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